Tarnished Gold

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Tarnished Gold

by Prim_the_Amazing

Summary

Becoming emperor of the cultivation world will start with a first step as small and basic as becoming Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace. For that, he must steal the position away from the current Head Disciple. Luo Binghe will sabotage, upstage, and completely and utterly best him.

The road to destroying everything and everyone who has ever wronged him, to becoming the highest ruler so that no one will ever have the right to control him ever again - it will start as simply as ruining Gongyi Xiao's life.

Compared to everything else he's already done, this should be easy.

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Luo Binghe brings all his skills of cunning and brutality to bear on Gongyi Xiao, Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace Sect. It… doesn't go too well for him.

Notes

This fic will be updated weekly.

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- Translation into Русский available: Запятнанное золото by Just_Ishmael

A Flawless Performance

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe's introduction to Huan Hua Palace Sect is performed flawlessly.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 2.2k long.

Luo Binghe's introduction to Huan Hua Palace Sect is performed flawlessly.

He stages himself at the banks of the Luochan River, soaked to the skin by cold spring water, artfully collapsed with his sword still in hand. Blood trickles gently from his injuries, not so deep that his surviving them would arouse any suspicion, but serious enough to spark alarmed concern in any who might see them. His robes are dirtied, but not so much that anyone would be disgusted at the idea of touching him. His hair lies wet and tangled, draped half over his face so that he might squint through his lashes without being noticed.

He lies there for less than a quarter of an hour before being found by the patrol from Huan Hua Palace. He had timed it well.

"Look!" one of them cries. "Over there!"

A gasp, murmuring as the rest of the patrol sees him. Huan Hua Palace disciples patrol in groups of at least half a dozen, when in territory as close as this to Abyssal Tears. Demonic creatures pass through them sometimes. Not often, but sometimes.

Luo Binghe is one such creature. The cultivators fail to notice this, however, flocking to him with fuss and concern.

"He must have washed up from the river!" one of them cries.

"Look at those horrible wounds," another of them gasps. "He must have been attacked."

Luo Binghe inflicted those 'horrible wounds' with his own claws. And so, of course, they look appropriately beastly - as if he just barely survived a fight against something monstrous.

"Quickly, pull him up!" one of them orders, and then hands are reaching down and grabbing at him. Luo Binghe lets himself be pulled like a dead weight, even if he keeps his grip on Xin Mo firm. He doesn't want to give any of the disciples a chance to hold and examine it. The

blade is just a little too demonic looking for comfort; it's a shame that it can't be disguised the same way that he can.

"Is he alive?" one of them asks, and then he's turned over onto his back. A delicate hand gently pushes his hair out of his face.

There's a sharp gasp of recognition.

"What is it? Do you know him?"

This is when Luo Binghe lets his brow furrow, allowing his lashes to flutter tentatively open. He makes his gaze hazy, unfocused, but it still lands unerringly on the one pale face looking at him with wide eyed shock.

"Qin… Wanyue?" he croaks, looking up at her.

He is unsurprised. This part had been carefully planned as well. Who better to first introduce himself to? Qin Wanyue had seen him kill many beasts during the survival event at the Immortal Alliance Conference, and he'd even saved her life from the poison called Without-a-Cure. Although she likely thought that it had just been a delayed reaction from the flower he had found for her, not what happened after.

The important part is that he left her with no reason to doubt or resent him. He had made a good impression; he's certain of it. Having her here can only help color his character to her comrades in the best light possible.

"It's… it's Luo Binghe!" she cries, still stunned at his apparent return from the dead. "He's *alive!"*

Like a good actor, he takes this as his cue to pass out.

The Huan Hua Palace disciples, as the heroic and righteous cultivators that they so clearly are, take him back to their sect at once. Luo Binghe allows himself to 'wake up' again about halfway back, gives them a hazy and confused explanation that is just suggestive enough to make them all excitedly jump to their own conclusions to helpfully fill in the blanks for him, thanks them for their generous rescue, and then stumbles so pitifully that half of the group rushes to urge him not to strain himself so. Explanations and gratitude can wait! He needs medical attention!

He concedes their point, and pretends not to hear them all whispering to each other about him. The things they say only satisfy him, their assumptions all running downhill like water just as he'd planned. *Lost in the Demon Real for so long,* they whisper, aghast. *It's incredible that he survived. He must have fought so hard, must have struggled so. But didn't his Peak Lord say that he…? But that can't be right, after all…*

Luo Binghe is content to let the seeds sprout on their own for now. Fanning the flames too eagerly may just as well put them out. A little bit of mystery can intrigue far more than

immediate answers. Let them wonder and speculate amongst themselves.

Huan Hua Palace is… a palace. There really is no other word for it. Instead of spreading their wealth across twelve whole mountain peaks, it is all concentrated in one long, rolling plot of land. It's so large that Luo Binghe *can't* see all of it at once, and suspects that the only way of doing so would be to fly high above. It sounds like a *city,* there are so many people talking and walking and casually living their lives inside of it. The palace glimmers in the sunlight, gems and gold gilding every edge available. Lush, colorful, lovingly tended gardens bloom like a veritable *forest,* and man made rivers artfully crisscross the grounds, trickling meditatively.

It's beautiful. It's opulent. It's bright and clean and expensive and gaudy, and Luo Binghe looks at it and thinks *that's going to be mine. All mine.*

Xin Mo hums with dark approval in his mind. It likes it when he's greedy, possessive.

The patrol group helps him stagger through the gates, Qin Wanyue nobly shouldering half of his weight for him. His appearance is so obviously bloodied and bedraggled that attention immediately gravitates towards them, curious eyes turning on them one by one.

"Don't just gawk!" one of the patrol members snaps. Tang Enlai, Luo Binghe knows. He paid careful attention during the journey, tucking away every crumb of information that they thoughtlessly spilled in front of him, gathering anything and everything that might become useful. "We found a wounded cultivator! Someone go get a healer!"

Tang Enlai rather likes having an excuse to boss people around, Luo Binghe suspects. But it works, because after a moment of dithering one of the watching disciples turns and runs towards, presumably, the palace infirmary. The patrol group continues to guide him in that direction at a more cautious pace, considerate of the injuries that he has to put effort into not healing completely.

They don't get far before the group stops in its tracks, however. A young man is walking towards them, being impatiently pulled along by his sleeves towards them by two younger disciples that are noisily and badly explaining the situation to him, talking over each other. He has an armful of scrolls tucked into the crook of one arm, having clearly been interrupted in the midst of some task. He's looking down at the two younger disciples with indulgent exasperation, so Luo Binghe has a moment to examine him unseen.

The young man looks like he's in his early twenties, roughly around Luo Binghe's age. He's handsome enough with dark eyes and a strong jaw, his straight, silky hair hanging down to his waist, some of it gathered up into a high bun. It's his smile that really highlights this beauty, though. It turns his eyes into something soft and warm, giving his face a gentle light. He's wearing the same embroidered gold and black robes that almost everyone else here is, a sword sheathed at his back - but Luo Binghe notices a detail of ornamentation that no one else has on them. A small golden medallion hanging around his neck, the shape of a flower etched into it.

As soon as the patrol group sees that this man is headed towards them, they stop moving. Luo Binghe instantly knows that this must mean that this person is someone of importance - and

thus, someone that he must pay attention to.

“Head Disciple Gongyi Xiao,” Tang Enlai calls out, and ah. So that’s him: the person that Luo Binghe is going to replace. Becoming Head Disciple is a necessary stepping stone to becoming the sect leader of Huan Hua Palace, after all.

Head Disciple Gongyi Xiao looks up from the two noisy children leading him, and looks at Luo Binghe. Their eyes meet.

The scrolls he’d been holding all come tumbling down onto the ground.

“Gongyi-shixiong!” one of the noisy children cries out, startled and scandalized. “Don’t be careless with our library’s scrolls!”

She sounds like she’s quoting someone.

Gongyi Xiao looks down at the scattered scrolls blankly, as if he had entirely forgotten their existence, but very quickly looks back up at Luo Binghe. His eyes are wide, his face pale. He looks as if he’s seen a ghost.

It’s a rather dramatic reaction, Luo Binghe privately thinks. It’s not as if he looks *that* terribly wounded.

He quickly gathers himself, however. His expression smoothes out into something serious and earnest, and he brings his hands together. When he speaks, his voice is clear and firm. “My apologies, Xie-shimei. Would you please assist me by gathering and returning these scrolls for me? This shixiong would dearly appreciate the help.”

The young disciple instantly puffs up with self important pride at the prettily made request, and she modestly agrees to be of assistance. Gongyi Xiao thanks her, and moves towards the group that brought Luo Binghe to Huan Hua Palace. His back is straight, his gait quick but not rushed. Not a drop of the shock from earlier is apparent on his face any longer.

Luo Binghe looks at him with the recognition of a fellow liar, seeing this man quickly and efficiently hide himself away underneath a performance that snaps shut over him like it’s second nature.

Definitely someone he’ll have to pay attention to, then.

“We found him during our patrol, Gongyi-shixiong,” Qin Wanyue rushes to explain as soon as he’s close enough. “Passed out at the banks of the Luochan River, wounded by some awful beast!”

“It… it was like a cat the size of a cart, but with the tough, scaled hide of an alligator… It was so *fast,”* Luo Binghe offers, his voice wavering just the slightest, as if he has to muster his strength to speak. “I can remember killing it in the end… but then I must have fallen into the river…”

“Don’t speak, Binghe,” Qin Wanyue urges him tearfully. “You can explain later.”

Gongyi Xiao's eyes sharpen with recognition.

"A Scaled Panthator," he says, instantly correctly guessing the beast Luo Binghe chose as his imaginary foe based on such a barebones description. Powerful enough to be impressive to survive and kill, but not so much that anyone might doubt his story. It's been years since he was weak enough to let such a creature wound him so heavily, of course. He could kill one unscathed, these days. "They live near rivers and are incredibly violently territorial, indiscriminately killing any creature that dares stumble across them."

Intelligent, Luo Binghe mentally notes. Or at the very least, well read.

"... You must have fought well, to survive such a fierce creature," Gongyi Xiao says, his eyes sweeping across Luo Binghe's form, taking in his torn and bloodied robes that speak of a brutal battle. "Might I know the name of this skilled cultivator?"

"This one's name is Luo Binghe," he says, watching Gongyi Xiao carefully for a reaction.

His dear *Shizun* told everyone that he died at the Immortal Alliance Conference, he knows. He would have been a fool not to get the lay of the land first before making his entrance back into the cultivation world. Gongyi Xiao is skilled enough to be Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace, and of the right age to have participated in that event. Did he hear of Luo Binghe's death? Does he remember his name? Or was it instantly forgotten and lost in the face of the overwhelming list of all the others lost that day? Luo Binghe was just one dead disciple from another sect entirely, after all, someone he had never even met. No sect lost more disciples at the Immortal Alliance Conference than Huan Hua Palace.

But whether or not Gongyi Xiao recognizes his name, his expression remains schooled as he gives Luo Binghe no reaction at all.

"Luo Binghe," Gongyi Xiao says, and he gives a polite nod of his head. "This one is Gongyi Xiao. Please, don't allow me to keep you from medical attention any longer. Tang-shidi, could you remain behind to give me a more detailed report?"

"Certainly, Head Disciple Gongyi!" Tang Enlai says, looking pleased to be singled out as the patrol group all bow to Gongyi Xiao before carefully leading Luo Binghe away again towards the infirmary.

Respected, Luo Binghe notes. Head Disciples generally are, but he knows that it isn't a universal rule. Ming Fan of Qing Jing peak, for example, had more generally been obeyed out of fear than out of any kind of genuine respect. People spoke of him insultingly behind his back, resentful and bitter towards him for lording his position over everyone. Petty bullies might have power, but that isn't the same as being *respected.*

Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like Gongyi Xiao is any kind of Ming Fan. He gives out orders like polite requests, and everyone eagerly jumps to fulfill them anyway. It is immediately clear to see that he is popular and well liked in Huan Hua Palace Sect.

Luo Binghe is going to have to change that.

A Warm Welcome

Chapter Summary

The news of his arrival spreads quickly through Huan Hua Palace Sect, just as planned.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 4k long.

The news of his arrival spreads quickly through Huan Hua Palace Sect, just as planned. Every sect thrives on gossip, and he had made sure to make his entrance as splashy as he could reasonably get away with, being dragged through the main gates like a nobly suffering hero in broad daylight for all to see. And he's not just any other cultivator either; he's a disciple of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect, one that's supposed to be *dead.* That's enough to make anyone's tongue wag with intrigue. Clearly, he is a man with a story, and everyone is eagerly trying to guess what juicy secrets he may be in possession of.

With his demonic hearing, he manages to overhear quite a few of these guesses from his infirmary bed. For the first time in over five years he's playing the act of a human again, wincing as his injuries are tended to and lying limply still with exhaustion.

He's better at it this time.

Perhaps he faked his death to run away from Cang Qiong Mountain, someone suggests. *They must have abused him terribly there, to push him to such measures.*

He was kidnapped by a demon, one of them authoritatively pushes. *It's the only explanation! He must have been struggling all these years to escape the Demon Realm.*

His Shizun banished him without telling anyone and then lied to hide it, one of the gossipers declares. *That brave young boy can't have done anything truly deserving of such a punishment, though - Shen Qingqiu is infamously merciless and unforgiving.*

Luo Binghe rather likes the guesses that involve disparaging his *Shizun.* He entertains himself by coming up with ways in which he might encourage those rumors in particular, while the healers fuss over his injuries. His demonic heritage is firmly tucked neatly out of sight, fiercely leashed underneath his iron control. They don't notice the slightest thing out of the ordinary.

It's around this time that the sect leader of Huan Hua Palace Sect himself comes to visit Luo Binghe.

It's a surprise, but not an eventuality he hadn't accounted for. Seeing him personally is a bit beneath a sect leader's notice, but it's not like it doesn't make any sense. Cang Qiong Mountain Sect and Huan Hua Palace Sect are ostensibly allies, in the same way that the Sha and Mobei Clans are ostensibly allies. Meaning, they're both constantly looking out for any opportunity to best or show up the other, always think the worst of each other, and have long held grudges and resentments that run over a mile long.

Luo Binghe has found that, in some ways, demons and humans are far more similar than either side would like to admit. It's just that demons tend to be more *honest* about their ugly, petty hatreds. That's all.

And so now, the Huan Hua Palace Master has a supposedly dead Cang Qiong Mountain disciple on his hands, and it's up to him to decide what to do with him. Generously escort him back into the hands of his allies, smugly putting them in his debt? Or set him back loose into the world, washing his hands of the business? Or…

It all depends on what the situation actually *is.* And that, clearly, is what the sect leader is here to assess.

Luo Binghe knows of the man's arrival before he enters the infirmary, because all of the chattering gossip ceases around him like a rolling wave of silence and respectful greetings. If he closes his eyes, he can imagine the golden robed figures all bowing to him like sunflowers turning to face the sun.

He opens his eyes to take in the man's entrance.

He has heard the sect leader of Huan Hua Palace be referred to as 'the Old Palace Master' as if it is his official title. There was no trace of insult or irreverence in any of the voices that spoke it, and Luo Binghe thinks he can understand why, now. The sect leader *is* old - the oldest immortal master that Luo Binghe has ever laid eyes on. He wears his age with a graceful and dignified air of wisdom and experience, his hair gray but his spine straight, his skin wrinkled and yet still possessing that subtle glow that anyone with a golden core can achieve. He looks clear eyed and present minded, his age only sharpening his mind, not dulling it.

They say that immortal masters age ten times slower than a regular mortal. If that is true, then Luo Binghe is in the presence of the oldest human he has ever met. What things *hasn't* this man seen? What hasn't he already experienced? In the face of that, he can see how 'the Old Palace Master' can be a respectful address. His age is an impressive achievement, not a burden.

The Old Palace Master is decked out in gold, just like everyone else in this place, although his robes are clearly the most expensive of all. Finely detailed embroidery curls around the edges, and glittering jewels are sown onto his hems. There are heavy golden rings on his knuckles, and the sheath for his sword is ornately decorated and gilded. He looks like he's casually wearing a small fortune.

Everyone in the room turns and bows to him as he enters, murmuring respectful greetings. He takes it as a matter of course, gliding further into the room, his eyes searching - and then landing on Luo Binghe.

By this point, Luo Binghe has been put into some clean, white robes fit for a patient, the blood washed off his skin, bandages tied snugly around his injuries. He is warm and dry, and doing his best to pretend to be nothing but an exhausted human cultivator who is only grateful to be alive. Nonthreatening, in other words. Heart stirringly pitiful, but still unassuming.

From the look on the Old Palace Master's face, you would think that Luo Binghe is a restless spirit that's clawed his way out of a cold grave for vengeance. Dazed shocked flashes across his face like lightning, bright and obvious - and then fading away right in the next second, leaving behind only a startled memory of its presence.

That was something, Luo Binghe thinks with suspicious certainty. *What does it mean?*

The Old Palace Master approaches him, his expression under control but his eyes fixed with far too much interest on Luo Binghe's face, his gaze tracing his every feature as if looking for something.

"Sect Leader," the healer who had been tending to Luo Binghe greets with a deep bow.

"This is the boy who was found by the Luochan River?" the Old Palace Master inquires, not taking his eyes off Luo Binghe for a moment.

"Yes, Sect Leader," the healer responds. "His injuries are serious, but not grave. I am confident that if given enough time and care, he will have a full recovery."

"Good," the Old Palace Master says, and then, "leave us."

The healer doesn't hesitate to obey, leaving Luo Binghe alone with the Old Palace Master.

Alright. Here it is: a vital step in his plan. This is where he needs to lay down the groundwork to eventually be accepted into Huan Hua Palace Sect. If he fails in this-- but no, he won't. He won't accept failure, and so he won't.

He's going to see through you, an insidious voice whispers in the back of his mind. *You can make demons agree to fight with and for you, but this is different. This is a righteous cultivator. He will look at you and see the truth of what you* are, *and then he'll--*

Luo Binghe shakes the thought off impatiently, violently. There's no room for it here and now. He has to *focus.*

"... Sect Leader Chen," Luo Binghe says, once it seems like the Old Palace Master won't be speaking first. He's just *looking* at Luo Binghe. Despite knowing that his disguise is as flawless as it could be, he finds himself compulsively checking it, circulating his qi and clenching his hand so he can feel the lack of claws there. "This humble Luo must thank you.

If your disciples had not found and rescued me, I don't know what would have happened to me."

The Old Palace Master blinks once, and the prickling intensity in his gaze lessens all at once. He is still looking at Luo Binghe, but it no longer feels like he is trying to look *past* his skin into something underneath. It is a relief.

"You're very welcome, young Luo," the Old Palace Master says, and he gives a warm, gracious smile. It doesn't quite reach his eyes, which still look far too focused for comfort. Luo Binghe supposes that you don't become the sect leader of one of the four great cultivation sects in the world by being someone willing to instantly let their guard down for some strange cultivator from a rival sect showing up on their doorstep out of the blue.

That's something that Luo Binghe's already considered: how this is all going to look to the sect leader, to the cultivators and disciples at Huan Hua Palace, and every single other person he could possibly think of. He is going to have to grow his power here *carefully* and *patiently* before he'll have enough loyalty and status to stop pretending all together, and that means that he's going to have to pay very close attention to the story everyone else will be seeing. What they will assume, what they will guess, what they will *suspect.*

And so this is something that Luo Binghe has already thought of. That the sect leader of Huan Hua Palace will look at him, and wonder whether or not Cang Qiong Mountain Sect *sent him* to him.

Luo Binghe doesn't think that relations are so poor between the two sects that they're outright trying to seed *spies* into each other's organizations, but it would be foolish to not at least *consider* the possibility, considering the suspicious circumstances of Luo Binghe's sudden reappearance from the dead. Is his presence here truly a coincidence, or deliberate? Does he have an agenda? Can he be trusted?

Respectively, the answers to those questions are: deliberate, yes, and *absolutely not.*

Luo Binghe must do everything in his power to keep the truth from the Old Palace Master - and also to stop him from drawing any false assumptions that *don't* benefit Luo Binghe. He must leave the sect leader with the clear and undeniable impression that his connection to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect is completely and utterly severed. The fact that this actually happens to be the truth is a useless coincidence.

The Old Palace Master opens his mouth, and Luo Binghe braces himself for any question he may ask. He's already rehearsed all of his answers, down to the slightest waver and pause in his voice. He's ready.

But instead of asking Luo Binghe what really happened at the Immortal Alliance Conference, or why he hasn't done anything to dissuade the cultivation world of his death for all of these years, the first thing he asks is, "Where did that name of yours come from?"

Luo Binghe blinks, startled. Without thinking, he speaks. "My name?"

"Luo," the Old Palace Master says, and doesn't elaborate from there.

"... My mother gave it to me," he says slowly, deciding to answer the question honestly. He sees no reason not to, even if it leaves him feeling wary. Is the Old Palace Master making *small talk* with him? Trying to ease him off his guard? "A humble washerwoman. She found me floating in the Luochuan River when I was a baby, and she took me in out of the kindness of her heart. She didn't have a family name herself, so she named us after the river that brought us together."

"Ah," the Old Palace Master says. "I see. How touching."

"She was very good to me," Luo Binghe says. Everyone likes a filial son, but it is also the truth. She was the first and last person to ever be truly good to him, and he'll never forget her for it.

"I'm sure she was," the Old Palace Master agrees kindly. And then, straight to the point: "Why aren't you at Cang Qiong Mountain, young Luo?"

This question was probably intended to be as startling as a slap to the face, but Luo Binghe only finds it reassuring. Finally, they're back on script. He lets his shoulders hunch, and he looks away with apparent discomfort.

"They--" He clears his throat. "They don't… they don't want me there, Sect Leader Chen."

The truth. They *never* wanted him there, really. He had kept stubbornly performing his duties and scraping out any training time he had in between chores and beatings, as if maybe if he just kept trying and trying, they would finally one day decide that he had earned his place. They would change their minds about him; they would finally give him a chance to prove himself. To prove that he belonged with them, that he could be useful and helpful.

It had been idiotic of him, really. Shen Qingqiu and Qing Jing Peak had never for even a moment pretended to accept him, and had never acted as if this was a thing that would ever change. He should have listened to the simple truth staring him in the face from the start.

This is when the Old Palace Master is supposed to ask *why* they don't want him there, what happened. What did he do.

Instead, he is silent for a minute before laying a hand on Luo Binghe's shoulder. A gesture of comfort.

It makes Luo Binghe want to twitch. It has been a long, *long* time since he was touched kindly. Whether it's been fighting off a beast in the Eternal Abyss, killing off enemies in the Demon Realm, or taking Sha Hualing's claws without flinching to show that he's worthy of her continued loyalty, none of it has been *kind.* There is an irrational, tense part of him that expects for the grip to turn harsh, crushing.

It doesn't. Luo Binghe shoves that part of himself down as inconvenient, ignoring the way being touched is putting him on edge. He looks up at the Old Palace Master with the most vulnerable look he can summon to his eyes, as if seeking guidance.

“Then that is their own loss, Luo Binghe,” the Old Palace Master says firmly. “I remember you from the Immortal Alliance Conference. You comported yourself nobly and admirably, and protected Huan Hua disciples despite being from another sect. You may not know it, with how disastrously that event ended and all the chaos that surrounded it, but you took first place above all others. Even my very own Head Disciple, Gongyi Xiao.”

Ah, so Gongyi Xiao *had* participated in that event. And Luo Binghe had bested him there, placing his name above his in the rankings for all to see. That doesn’t hurt at all.

Luo Binghe looks bashfully downwards, as if embarrassed at such direct praise.

“It… it was only my honor to help your disciples, Sect Leader Chen. It was the right thing to do. Anyone else would have done the same.”

“Don’t be so certain,” the Old Palace Master says, with the wry amusement of an elder. More seriously, he adds, “If Cang Qiong Mountain Sect refuses to care for the disciple they willingly took on, then that is only a loss of face for them. Huan Hua Palace will not hesitate to fulfill the duties that they neglect. Stay with us, Luo Binghe. I promise you that we will show you far more appreciation than that place ever did.”

Luo Binghe lets the shock he feels at this offer break out on his face.

“You… do you mean that-- that…”

“Become a disciple of Huan Hua Palace Sect,” the Old Palace Master says firmly, looking him straight in the eye. “Cang Qiong Mountain Sect have refused to acknowledge you as anything but dead for these past five years. If that is so, then they have no right to protest at us taking you in. If you are dead to them, then they have forsaken any claim to you.”

This is… actually quite unexpected. It was always part of the plan to be taken in as a disciple of Huan Hua Palace Sect, of course, but Luo Binghe hadn’t expected it to be so… well… *easy?* He would have thought that he’d need to prove himself first, in *some* way. For there to be hesitation or skepticism for him to overcome, to have to endear himself, to engineer a few situations for him to show off his skill and usefulness. To make them *want* him.

But instead he is being embraced instantly, fully and without reservation. Having expected to have to make some sort of effort, Luo Binghe is left strangely stunned by the complete lack of resistance.

“That’s…” Luo Binghe says - and he makes his voice break halfway through. He quickly looks down, hiding his face, and breathes raggedly for a moment as he visibly gathers his composure before looking back up again. His expression is raw, surprised, *fragile.* “Sect Leader Chen is too generous. He doesn’t even know why Cang Qiong doesn’t want this lowly disciple--!”

The Old Palace Master waves one hand in dismissal, and he stops talking.

“Luo Binghe can tell this master when he is ready,” the Old Palace Master says magnanimously. “Huan Hua Palace is known for their generosity. Please, take advantage of

it.”

He stopped trusting or believing in generosity years ago. There is something more to this, even if it might very well just be foolishness.

But it’s still too good of an offer to pass up.

“Then… this disciple will prove himself worthy of such generosity,” Luo Binghe says, letting determination shine through in his voice and expression.

The Old Palace Master chuckles warmly. “Your resolution does you credit, young Luo. This master is certain that you will do so.”

“Thank you, Sect Leader Chen.” Luo Binghe gives as good of a respectful bow as he can from his infirmary bed. “This disciple will always be grateful for your kindness.”

The Old Palace Master smiles, satisfied.

“You may call me Shizun.”

Luo Binghe spends his first night as a Huan Hua Palace Sect disciple in his infirmary bed. Or at least, his body does.

As soon as his body drifts to sleep, his mind opens its eyes in the Dream Realm.

The landscape around him is shattered, littered with jagged broken rocks with edges sharp enough to cut you at the slightest touch. Above him, the sky is black and endless in a way that promises that large, hungry creatures could be hidden within the darkness, no stars or moon or sun to give any light at all. The only illumination comes from a sluggishly glowing river of lava, burning hot in a way that makes it feel like the insides of his lungs singe just from breathing in the foul air. In the not so far distance he can hear the guttural noises of beasts and monsters shifting, moving, always and forever searching for more prey to claw apart and devour. They have his scent. Blood and ash coats his hands, his skin, his hair, the inside of his mouth.

He is in the Eternal Abyss.

He is dreaming.

He is in control.

Luo Binghe closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. As he releases it, he strips away unwelcome details one by one. The taste in his mouth, the layer of filth covering his hair and skin and clothes and buried deep underneath his claws, the foul scent to the air, the nearby presence of beasts. When he opens his eyes, he is in a place that is as far removed from the Eternal Abyss as it is possible to be.

He is back at Huan Hua Palace, out in the opening courtyard where he had first been led in. The sky is sweet and blue, the tended flowers and trees lush and green, the air pure and light in his lungs. The palace gleams clean and golden, prosperous and untouched. The only sound comes from the gently trickling river. None of the bustling, noisy people are left, leaving the impression of an empire that was calmly and peacefully evacuated only yesterday. It is a sprawling kingdom for one.

“Are you already so fond of the place, boy?” the Elder Dream Demon, Meng Mo, says from behind him, neatly breaking the tranquility of the dream. “This is the first place you thought of?”

Luo Binghe turns to find Meng Mo looking around himself with amusement. The Dream Demon had been a patch of purple haze when they had first met, but by this point the parasite has managed to leech enough power from him to be able to actually consistently maintain a form again. His chosen shape is, predictably, handsome. The appearance of his age seems to rest somewhere between the Old Palace Master and Sect Leader Yue Qingyuan, his dark hair still in the process of graying, his purple eyes graced with crows feet. His robes are silken and ethereal, and trail across the ground in a way that would quickly leave them filthy if this were anything but a dream.

“It will be mine,” Luo Binghe says. “I might as well get used to it.”

Meng Mo hums, and Luo Binghe feels his subtle touch as he idly skims across Luo Binghe’s most recent memories. Luo Binghe automatically moves to pull back the memories he doesn’t want the Dream Demon to see - mostly just some internal thoughts. There isn’t much that’s important to hide.

“You seem to already have them in the palm of your hand,” Meng Mo says, grinning. “Pretty girls fawning over you and that foolish old man treating you like his beloved grandson - everything’s going according to plan, huh?”

“This is only the very beginning,” Luo Binghe says. Everything *has* been going very smoothly, but he’s not going to start counting his victories until he’s actually there. He can’t afford to get sloppy or impatient. He’s made promises to demon clans, has deals to fulfill, a plan to execute. “How are things in the Demon Realm?”

“Fine,” Meng Mo assures him. “Your pet ice demon is preoccupied trying to survive another one of his uncle’s schemes to get him killed - that’s family for you, hm? - but that feisty little Hualing is making up for him by pushing back the Ren Clan on her own, while also keeping her father distracted. The Fa Clan--”

The Dream Demon gives his report, and Luo Binghe listens. In the back of his mind, he goes over the necessary next steps like a checklist. Become Head Disciple. Become Sect Leader. Take down Tian Yi Overlook Sect, Zhao Hua Temple Sect. *Destroy* Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. Make Shen Qingqiu watch. Make him *beg* for mercy.

That’s as far as he’s come; he’ll make it up from there. One thing he’s certain of, though: he won’t be showing mercy.

They’re grandiose plans with lofty goals, but achieving these things will be simple. He only has to take one step after another, building and building upon his successes. Becoming emperor of the cultivation world will start with a first step as small and basic as becoming Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace. For that, he must steal the position away from the current Head Disciple. Luo Binghe will sabotage, upstage, and completely and utterly best him.

The road to destroying everything and everyone who has ever wronged him, to becoming the highest ruler so that no one will ever have the right to control him ever again - it will start as simply as ruining Gongyi Xiao’s life.

Compared to everything else he’s already done, this should be *easy.*

The Goldfish Pond

Chapter Summary

His idle plans to explore the sprawling palace on his own are quickly interrupted. Almost immediately after he's left the infirmary, the Qin sisters descend upon him.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 4.2k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe is praised for how quickly he is recovering. He reigns in his healing as much as his patience is willing to allow, which still means that the healer is visibly impressed and surprised by his recovery. Luo Binghe assures her that he's always been quick to heal.

"The resilience of youth," the healer sighs. "If only all of my patients could be so hardy. At this rate, we could likely release you from the infirmary today and leave you to go through the rest of your recovery in the comfort of your own quarters, if you like. So long as you come in for regular check-ins, of course."

"I would like that," Luo Binghe says. Tilting his head, he asks, "... And who might I go to, to find out where my quarters are?"

"Ah," the healer says, furrowing her brow in thought. "Head Disciple Gongyi, I suppose? If he doesn't know, then he'll know who you're *actually* supposed to speak with, at least."

Luo Binghe thanks her, and after a last examination and firm instructions to not exert himself or pick at his bandages, he is given some new clean robes and released into the palace.

The robes are black with gold accents, marking him as a disciple of the sect. If his guess is correct, the higher up in the ranks one is within Huan Hua Palace Sect, the more gold they are 'allowed' to wear. It's a bit of a shame; he thinks that this darker look is more appealing. Well, he can dress however he wants when he's the sect leader. Perhaps he'll wear black and red according to his own preferences, with golden jewelry as a nod to the sect…

His idle plans to explore the sprawling palace on his own are quickly interrupted. Almost immediately after he's left the infirmary, the Qin sisters descend upon him.

“Binghe!” Qin Wanyue cries, looking as if he might make her weep with worry. “What are you doing out of the infirmary so soon?”

Qin Wanrong is more enterprising, noticing his black and golden robes at once. She reaches out to pluck at them without hesitation or shame, and he allows it. If she were a demon it would be acceptable for him to smack her hand away or bare his teeth at her, but she isn’t and so he doesn’t.

“Binghe is wearing a Huan Hua Palace disciple uniform!” Qin Wanrong says. She looks up at him hopefully, as if pleading for a treat. “Does this mean…?”

“I have been accepted by the Old Palace Master into Huan Hua Palace,” he confirms, smiling indulgently down at her, as if this is for her sake. She squeals like she’s been given a present, and clings onto his left arm like she never intends to give him up.

She hasn’t changed much since the last time he saw her, then. He remembers being taken aback by her immature presumptuousness at the time, but he supposes it *is* a valid tactic. People are likely often too shocked by her attitude to scold her or stop her from doing what she wants, and maybe even charmed enough by her pretty face and almost naively rude behavior to forgive her afterwards. If you only act shamelessly enough then people will give up on correcting you and instead just start working *around* you, as it’s simply easier than trying to handle the matter directly.

It’s the sort of strategy that might let her continue to be spoiled and longsufferingly catered to for the rest of her life, but it closes many other doors of opportunity to her. Who would ever allow someone so willful and oblivious any amount of responsibility or power? For all he knows, she knows *exactly* what she’s doing, but if she does then she has no sense of ambition.

“The healer thought I was ready to be discharged from the infirmary, although I shouldn’t exert myself yet,” he says, answering Qin Wanyue. He catches her glaring at her sister for only a moment, but she quickly looks back at him with unhappy concern. The way she looks, there’s a feeling that doing anything but lying still in his sickbed as she handfeeds him apple slices and fusses over his injuries would be wronging her.

“We came to visit you,” she says. “Binghe was so kind to us, all those years ago at the Immortal Alliance Conference…”

She flushes, likely remembering *other* things that happened at the Immortal Alliance Conference.

That’s an issue that he hasn’t decided how to handle yet. At the time… it truly hadn’t been a calculated decision, the way it often is for him nowadays. They had both thought that she’d been dying, she’d been desperate for a distraction, comfort… He hadn’t been able to bear to say no to her, especially after failing to keep his promise to cure her. From a certain point of view, the whole situation could be said to have been terribly romantic. The memory probably left a huge impression on her.

For Luo Binghe, their coupling was completely overshadowed by what happened to him later during that event. He's hardly given it any thought at all, in fact.

He could pretend like that isn't the case, of course. He could convince her that it was just as lovely and meaningful for him as it had been for her. It's what she *wants* to think, so it would be very easy to do. But what would he get out of that? Would it benefit him to confirm to her that they have a special connection, or would it be a hindrance?

He hasn't properly gotten the lay of the land yet. Once he feels more oriented, he'll make up his mind on what angle to take.

"Anyone else would have done the same," he assures her firmly, an easy lie to fall back on. Anyone else would *not* have done the same. Anyone else would not have been that foolish, to take on such a burden when they were meant to be showing off their talents to the cultivation world.

He'd been such a naive child, leaving himself open for anyone to use or exploit as they wished.

"Do either of you know where the Head Disciple is?" he asks, brushing past it. "I need to speak with him about my accommodations."

"Gongyi-shixiong?" Qin Wanrong asks, the side of her face pressed up against his upper arm. She perks up a little as she says his name, as if excited at the idea of seeing him.

Popular, Luo Binghe notes. Of course, he'd noticed that the Head Disciple was handsome when they'd met yesterday. With his talents - he must be talented for Luo Binghe beating him at the Immortal Alliance Conference to be notable - and position on top of that, it's unsurprising that he's admired in *that* way as well.

But Luo Binghe is handsomer than him. He doesn't think this arrogantly, but matter of factly. He's always viewed his own looks as objectively as he might his skills with his sword, demonic cultivation, or the Four Arts. Appearances are just another tool to use, and he's been fortunate that his are good. Standing side by side with the Head Disciple will only help highlight their differences.

Qin Wanyue frowns thoughtfully.

"I think I last saw him at the training grounds by the Goldfish Pond," she offers. "He could have moved on since then, but we can help you look."

Luo Binghe thanks them gratefully for the help, and lets them lead the way. Qin Wanrong doesn't let go of his arm, and Qin Wanyue drifts next to him like she very much wants to grab the other but is debating with herself whether or not this would be too forward. He lets himself limp a little as he walks, so it might only look like Qin Wanrong is clinging to him like this to help support him - although really, she's doing the opposite. Perhaps it doesn't matter, though; everyone at Huan Hua Palace who recognizes her face must be used to her antics by now.

Most people turn to glance or outright stare at him as they walk past, but not everyone. It's not like the halls go dead silent in his wake or anything, but there's a definite air of interest following him.

He hadn't taken the time to appreciate it yesterday, but the inside of Huan Hua Palace is as opulent as the outside, if not more so. Intricately woven tapestries and ornate paintings decorate the walls, interspersed by the occasional fragile vase or majestic statue. Windows, frames, and ledges are all liberally gilded with gold, and the floor gleams as if it doesn't go a single day without being washed and polished. The ceiling vaults high above them, the walls are wide apart from each other, and each doorway is wide enough to bring a cart through, the doors perpetually propped open. People easily move in and out, all headed on their own business or caught in conversation in the middle of the hall like a rock in a river, the stream of people flowing smoothly around them.

Luo Binghe imagines that this is likely just a high traffic area of the palace. There are probably parts of it that are forbidden territory entirely, access permitted only to certain people. Once the Qin sisters take him outside, the mood grows less busy and more peaceful, people not packed in with each other.

The air smells of sweet flowers and fresh grass, and they lead him with easy familiarity across small bridges that curve over the winding river that zig zags across the grounds, past fountains and statues and gatherings of people. It's like a chain of gardens, each one designed to create an illusion of discrete privacy, a feeling of partitioned closeness. In some of them they walk past what seem to be classes, young disciples all standing in rows and being led through sword exercises by a patient elder, or sitting in a fanned out circle as they meditate, or paint talismans, practice their calligraphy, pluck guqin strings, draw, spar, or are lectured at about something or other.

Being pulled past so many sights is a little bit overwhelming, and leaves him with the feeling that Huan Hua Palace must be an endless thing. It's not like Cang Qiong Mountain, which had been neatly partitioned off into twelve distinct peaks, making it all feel more… manageable. It's difficult to imagine being able to navigate such a place.

But he *will* learn how. If all the people here can manage it, then so can he. This palace will be *his,* which means that he will know every inch of it, inside and out.

"How do you know your way around so well?" Luo Binghe asks, the dozenth time Qin Wanyue takes a turn without hesitation. He smiles as she looks at him. "This place is so large, Qin-shijie. I'd get terribly lost without you."

He uses the address on a whim. It more firmly marks him as a disciple of Huan Hua Palace Sect, even if it also puts distance between him and Qin Wanyue. She's been familiarly calling him Binghe, and he'd been avoiding deciding what to call her until just now. If he changes his mind later, he can always ask her for permission to use her given name. He can make it sound like a charming request.

She flushes a little at the last sentence. "Well-- I've been living here all my life, after all."

“You’d get lost without *me* too,” Qin Wanrong protests, butting in. She looks up at Luo Binghe with innocent eyes. “It’s really not that difficult, Binghe. Look at the paving stones!”

She points down in demonstration, like he maybe doesn’t know where the paving stones are. He obediently looks.

“Do you see?” she urges him. “There’s pictures!”

There are. Some of the paving stones are colored - gold, of course. They form pretty patterns that sometimes even form into simple shapes or symbols, like flowers or fish. He had simply taken them for yet more elaborate decoration.

“They’re waymarkers?” he asks, his brain racing forward to reach the conclusion she’s leading him to.

“Yes,” she says, nodding. “You just need to learn how to read them, and then you don’t even need to remember where you’re going to find it. That’s what A-Yue is doing - she’s just reading the pavingstones.”

“A-Rong,” Qin Wanyue protests, looking a little put out. Luo Binghe wonders if she’d been hoping that she’d be able to help him around the palace for a little longer, before he learned the trick himself. Her sister doesn’t seem to notice, clearly preening at getting to teach Luo Binghe something. “I *do* remember where the Goldfish Pond is without having to use the paving stones. We’ve both lived here for so long - don’t you remember the way yet?”

“People are always happy to help Rong-er find her way,” Qin Wanrong says smugly. Her sister shoots an embarrassed glance in Luo Binghe’s direction.

“Does Gongyi-shixiong ever help you find your way?” Luo Binghe asks, deciding that it’s time to do a bit of light probing.

“He does!” Qin Wanrong says brightly, before giving a little performative pout. “When he’s not too busy, at least. I asked for his help with my reading yesterday, but he was so distracted that he just made me even more confused. When he was done he went to his room, and he stayed there *all* day.”

“Gongyi-shixiong told me to send his apologies to you when he saw me earlier today,” Qin Wanyue cuts in. “He said that he had a very bad headache yesterday.”

“Well, he should have said so!” Qin Wanrong huffs. “I would have found someone else to spend time with if he’d just *said* that he was sick.”

Helpful, Luo Binghe notes. Helping disciples with their reading doesn’t seem like the sort of duty that a head disciple would have, even if Huan Hua Palace Sect might do things a little differently than Cang Qiong Mountain Sect.

“What sort of person is Gongyi-shixiong?” he asks. “I don’t know him at all, not like the two of you do.”

“He’s a very kind shixiong,” Qin Wanyue says.

“And *handsome,”* Qin Wanrong adds shamelessly.

“A-Rong!”

“Well, he is!” Qin Wanrong turns her face towards Luo Binghe again, like a flower towards the sun. “... But Binghe has a very nice face too.”

Luo Binghe gives a light laugh, even as Qin Wanyue looks like she wants to physically drag her sister away from him. “Thank you, Qin-shijie, I’m flattered.”

“You’re welcome,” she says with apparent sincerity. Then, smoothly switching tracks back to the former topic, she goes on. “Gongyi-shixiong *is* very good looking and nice, but he can be a bit boring too. You can’t ask him any questions about monsters or else he’ll just keep talking and talking about them, and he’s always telling me to be more careful on missions even though nothing bad has *actually* happened, and you can’t flirt with him! Not even for fun!”

“Oh?” Luo Binghe asks. “Why not?”

“He gets very embarrassed,” Qin Wanyue says.

“And the Little Palace Mistress will whip you if she catches you doing it,” Qin Wanrong adds casually. “She’s so territorial!”

Luo Binghe slows his pace, sensing something important.

“The Little Palace Mistress?” he asks.

“That’s what we call the Old Palace Master’s daughter,” Qin Wanyue offers.

“She’s like a tiger!” Qin Wanrong complains. “She gets to do *anything* she wants just because her daddy’s the sect leader!”

Luo Binghe looks towards Qin Wanyue. “Is that right?”

Qin Wanyue grimaces slightly. “Well… it’s not *wrong,* no. She can be a bit… spoiled.”

She actually stops to look around them first before she says that last word, as if afraid of being overheard.

“And she’s… possessive of Gongyi-shixiong?” Luo Binghe asks. “Are they together?”

“She wishes!” Qin Wanrong crows.

“They might as well be,” Qin Wanyue corrects. “Gongyi-shixiong is the Head Disciple, and everyone knows that he’ll inherit the position of Sect Leader once the Old Palace Master retires. The Little Palace Mistress *adores* him. It’s not official or anything, but there’s as good as an arranged marriage between them.”

Qin Wanrong nods sadly in agreement, as if mourning the Head Disciple's attachment to the Little Palace Mistress. Luo Binghe turns this new information around in his head, seeing how it changes things.

It's not a *good* revelation. So, Gongyi Xiao's position as the Head Disciple isn't just secured by the Old Palace Master's regard for him, but also his daughter's affection. If his apparently spoiled and temperamental daughter absolutely refuses to marry anyone but Gongyi Xiao, then… he'll likely keep him in his position. Why would he allow his daughter to marry anyone but the Head Disciple and eventual succeeding Sect Leader of Huan Hua Palace, after all?

… It's okay. He can work with this. His plan still stands. He'll just have to sabotage Gongyi Xiao's standing with the Old Palace Master, *and* the Little Palace Mistress. They must *both* decide that Luo Binghe is the obvious better choice.

"Here we are," Qin Wanyue finally says some minutes later. "This is the Goldfish Pond."

The Goldfish Pond is, predictably, a garden that overflows with gold. That is to say, almost all of its flowers are overwhelmingly yellow and orange. He spots golden peonies, azaleas, daffodils, roses, and half a dozen more kinds that he can't name. Luo Binghe has focused more on learning about the type of plants that might cure, poison, or devour him - not so much the purely pretty ones. Yellow water lilies float on the surface of the, presumably, titular pond of this garden. Orange goldfish swim peacefully in the clear water of the pond, some of them as large as his forearm.

"Come on now," the voice of Gongyi Xiao says in an encouraging tone. "You almost have it!"

Luo Binghe's gaze searches - and he finds him. Gongyi Xiao is standing with a young disciple - the little girl that had scolded him for dropping his scrolls, actually - and both of their swords are out. Luo Binghe is surprised. That girl is so young, and yet she already has a real blade in her hands? It never would have been allowed at Cang Qiong Mountain.

The girl - Xie-shimei, wasn't it? - stomps her foot on the ground in frustration, looking like she wants to throw her sword to the ground in disgust.

"You said that an *hour* ago!" she complains.

"And you nearly had it then too," Gongyi Xiao says. "You're so close, Xie-shimei. Weren't you saying that you wished you could make a sword glare?"

"But Gongyi-shixiong, why do I have to learn how to do it *now?"* she whines. "I've got ages and ages before I'm supposed to know how to do it, don't I? You can just teach me later!"

Gongyi Xiao's shoulders seem to hunch, but it only lasts for a second.

"There's no sense in putting things off forever," he says reasonably. "Just imagine how impressed Pan-shidi will be if you manage to learn it so much sooner than him!"

Xie-shimei actually seems to look a little reluctantly persuaded by this angle of attack. Before her shixiong is able to fully convince her to go back to her training, however, Qin Wanrong helpfully announces their arrival for them.

“Gongyi-shixiong!” Qin Wanrong calls out, finally releasing Luo Binghe’s captive arm. She crosses the distance between them and cheerfully throws her arms around Gongyi Xiao, who has to fumble to make sure that his sword is out of her way. He sways a little underneath her sudden weight, but doesn’t stumble. “A-Yue told me you had a headache! Are you feeling better now?”

“Wanrong-shimei,” Gongyi Xiao says, with a resigned exasperation that speaks to many similarly overly enthusiastic greetings in the past. When he scolds her, it’s without any hope or expectation of actually being listened to - and there’s no real fire in it either. “Don’t be so intimate. Isn’t this a little too inappropriate?”

“You let *Xie-shimei* hug you,” Qin Wanrong protests, stubbornly not letting go.

“Xie-shimei is *ten,”* Gongyi Xiao says. He seems to be trying to push Qin Wanrong away, but he’s hardly using any force at all.

“I’m *almost* eleven,” Xie-shimei huffs, looking indignant to be used as an argument, but grateful for the interruption. She’s already throwing herself dramatically down on the grass, letting her sword fall to the ground.

“Rong-er doesn’t see what age has to do with it,” Qin Wanrong pouts.

Gongyi Xiao opens his mouth to say something more - and then he spots Luo Binghe and Qin Wanyue lingering further back, watching their interaction. His eyes go wide and his hands instantly spring away from Qin Wanrong as if burned, held uselessly in the air.

“Wanrong-shimei--!” Gongyi Xiao sputters urgently “You really should let go!”

Well. Qin Wanyue *had* said that he gets very embarrassed when flirted with. It seems like that embarrassment mostly has to do with being flirted with while there’s an *audience.*

Gongyi Xiao sounds so urgent that it actually convinces Qin Wanrong to let go of him, looking behind herself with suspicious alarm. Once she only sees them, she sighs, putting a hand to her chest.

“Don’t scare me like that, Gongyi-shixiong,” she scolds. “I thought the Little Palace Mistress was stalking up behind me or something!”

“Only us,” Luo Binghe says, deciding that it’s time to enter the conversation, approaching. He gives a friendly nod to Xie-shimei, and then turns to give Gongyi Xiao a more respectful bow, as is appropriate for the Head Disciple--

“Don’t!” Gongyi Xiao says quickly.

Luo Binghe freezes, confused. He tries to read Gongyi Xiao, but the man quickly composes himself.

“That’s… Luo Binghe doesn’t have to bow,” Gongyi Xiao says, before smiling. “I don’t need such respect.”

“You’re the Head Disciple of this great and impressive sect,” Luo Binghe says. “That doesn’t earn you some respect?”

“There’s no need for things to be so formal between us,” Gongyi Xiao insists.

“Gongyi-shixiong is always so modest,” Qin Wanyue remarks.

“Was there something that Luo Binghe wanted?” Gongyi Xiao asks, as if trying to change the subject. His eyes take in Luo Binghe’s robes. “Are you settling in well?”

“That’s actually what I wanted to talk about with you,” Luo Binghe says. “And… it’s Luo-shidi to you now, I believe.”

Cang Qiong Mountain Sect had decided such things based on the order of peaks more than age or rank, although those played their part as well. But Huan Hua Palace Sect isn’t divided up into such orderly categories, and Luo Binghe still needs to learn how exactly the hierarchy here works. Are the Qin sisters his shijies because they’ve been with the sect longer than him? If so, wouldn’t young *Xie* be his shijie as well? Or perhaps age would trump that, and the Qin sisters are actually his shimeis - he’s about a year older than them, he thinks.

But no matter what, it can only be a safe assumption to call the *Head Disciple* of Huan Hua Palace his shixiong.

The way that Gongyi Xiao blinks at him, you’d think that Luo Binghe has just said something baffling.

“Luo… shidi,” he repeats slowly, like he’s struggling to fit the title onto him.

“Is that not correct?” Luo Binghe asks.

“Ah-- no, it is. I was only surprised. Congratulations to--” Just a second’s hesitation. “--Luo-shidi for being accepted into the sect. I’m sure you’ll make Huan Hua Palace proud.”

“You honor me,” Luo Binghe demures. “But… the reason why I’m here is to find out where exactly I’m meant to sleep tonight?”

“Oh!” Gongyi Xiao says. “You-- of course. I will help you find a room at once.”

“Are you sure?” Luo Binghe asks, and smiles down at the young girl. “I’d hate to interrupt Xie-shimei’s training…”

Xie-shimei looks up at him and immediately flushes. She hurries to right herself from her exhausted flop on the ground, sitting with great dignity.

“You may have him,” she grants with all of the hauteur of an empress. “I’m done with Gongyi-shixiong for today.”

“How generous,” Luo Binghe says. “I’m certain that you will attain your sword glare very soon, with your impressive dedication.”

“Naturally,” she agrees, puffing up a little at the praise.

“Will we be seeing Binghe again soon?” Qin Wanyue asks hopefully.

“Of course, Qin-shijie. Thank you again for helping me find Gongyi-shixiong.”

“You can always ask us for help!” Qin Wanrong chimes in. “We know *everyone* here, really.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Gongyi Xiao stops to give Xie-shimei a few last encouragements to keep up with her exercises, before stepping aside with the slightest reluctance apparent in the set of his shoulders and turning a smile on Luo Binghe. It’s not the smile he was giving Xie-shimei before he was interrupted, but instead a very polished one. It makes him look the very picture of a dutiful, bright, and earnest Head Disciple. It wouldn’t be obviously false if it weren’t for just how perfect it is.

Luo Binghe returns it with an equally flawless smile.

Gongyi Xiao looks away.

“Let’s go, then.”

Chapter End Notes

- GYX calls QWY and QWR 'Wanyue-shimei and Wanrong-shimei' purely to avoid confusion, since they'd both be 'Qin-shimei' to him.

- QWR has been trying to call him 'Gongyi-ge' or some other likewise cutesy shit for YEARS now and he's been desperately fending her off the entire time. Boundaries! Distance! The wives are not allowed to flirt with him!

The Palace Tiger

Chapter Summary

> She's wrapped up in delicately pink robes, and expensive golden ornaments decorate her hair, flattering the sweet features of her face. All in all, she's dressed much like a gentle butterfly. It would almost be a convincing impression if it weren't for the viciously barbed metal whip coiled up at her hip.

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is 6k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As they walk people bow, curtsy, nod, wave to, and otherwise greet Gongyi Xiao as he passes. He acknowledges all of these gestures with either a nod or a smile, modest and friendly. Luo Binghe silently observes, committing the smiling faces to memory. It will be helpful for him to know who is warmly disposed to Gongyi Xiao, and who isn't. At the moment it seems like that list is respectively *everyone* and *no one,* but Luo Binghe knows that can't be true. There surely must be *someone* in this palace who doesn't adore the Head Disciple. Success always breeds resentment. They're likely only biting their tongues due to knowing that people would disagree with them. Who would air such clearly unpopular opinions?

Luo Binghe will have to find them and help make them feel comfortable enough to speak more freely.

"Gongyi-shixiong is much admired here," Luo Binghe remarks after a young shidi has to be saved by their teacher from walking into a wall when they get too distracted enthusiastically waving at Gongyi Xiao. "It is to his credit."

"Everyone is just very kind," Gongyi Xiao is quick to insist. "Really, I don't do much."

"I find that hard to believe, with how warmly everyone regards you," Luo Binghe murmurs. "Huan Hua Palace wouldn't appreciate a Head Disciple who does nothing."

"I-- yes, I suppose so," Gongyi Xiao says. "I don't do *nothing.* But really, I think the sect would be overjoyed with me even if I did barely anything at all. Everyone was just so relieved that the Old Palace Master was willing to finally appoint a new Head Disciple."

“Oh?” Luo Binghe asks, his attention sharpening. Gongyi Xiao seems to hesitate to answer the prompting noise, but Luo Binghe burns a stare into the side of his face until he gives in.

“... He was very fond of the Head Disciple before me,” Gongyi Xiao explains. “She died in a very unfortunate way, and he grieved her for a long time. He refused to replace her for many years. Huan Hua Palace Sect had to get used to running without a Head Disciple in place for all that time. Everyone was thrilled when he gave me the position.”

He touches the golden medallion hanging around his neck, and Luo Binghe understands that it must be a signifier of his status.

He’ll be taking that from him as well, then.

“I see,” Luo Binghe says lightly. “You must have impressed him very much, to convince him to finally get a new Head Disciple.”

“It was just a matter of time, that’s all,” Gongyi Xiao says. “Every broken heart must let go eventually.”

Luo Binghe wonders if this is only false modesty, or something that Gongyi Xiao actually believes. It’s difficult to tell - and he doesn’t like that. He’s usually much better at reading people, but the longer they talk the more settled in his composure Gongyi Xiao seems to become.

Gongyi Xiao leads him through the winding gardens of Huan Hua Palace, and then they’re back at the palace proper, but nowhere near the bustling section with the infirmary that he’d been in earlier. It’s a little quieter here, but not by very much. Disciples flit around both on ground and up in the air, balancing on their swords. It seems like there’s some sort of flying class happening up there, actually. A few adult cultivators are floating beneath a herd of children wobbling uncertainly in the air, holding a net taut between them.

Back at Qing Jing Peak they’d done those exercises over a lake, so that anyone unfortunate enough to fall would end up soaking wet and shivering - a very efficient punishment and motivator both to not fall. Luo Binghe had done reasonably well, until one of his shixiongs had given him a helpful shove to the back.

“You should technically be placed in the Copper Dormitory,” Gongyi Xiao says, breaking Luo Binghe out of his reminiscing. He looks down from the sky towards the Head Disciple. “But as most of the other Copper disciples are *children* I think that it would perhaps be more appropriate to place Luo-shidi somewhere else. I could place you in the Silver or Gold Dormitories, but… perhaps a private room might suit better for your unique situation?”

“If Gongyi-shixiong thinks it best,” Luo Binghe says politely, secretly relieved. He hadn’t looked forward to potentially sharing a sleeping space with dozens of strangers he doesn’t trust. He had been pressed out of the dormitories back in Qing Jing Peak and been made to sleep in a woodshed instead, and it had secretly been a relief then too. It had been drafty and uncomfortable, certainly - but it had been worth it for the peace of mind, knowing that his dear shixiongs were sleeping somewhere far away from him. He had slept easier for it. “What sort of people usually get private rooms?”

“Oh - all the cultivators who rise above disciplehood, really. It’s also possible to pay for the privilege before then, although it’s quite costly. It doesn’t really seem worth it to me.”

“So you sleep in the Gold Dormitory, then?” The ranking system seems intuitive enough.

“Ah, no. I get a room of my own as well, as the Head Disciple.” Gongyi Xiao seems almost a little embarrassed to admit to this special privilege, as if it isn’t a perfectly reasonable benefit for a head disciple to receive.

“Are you certain that it’s fine to give me my own room?” Luo Binghe asks. “If everyone else has to either graduate or pay for it…”

“An exception can be made,” Gongyi Xiao says firmly. “After everything you’ve been through… It’s the least that can be done for you.”

Luo Binghe blinks. That’s - somehow, it’s not an argument he’d been expecting. Gongyi Xiao says it sincerely enough, like he really means it.

Except he doesn’t. What does this spoiled and beloved Golden Head Disciple know of what Luo Binghe has been through? *No one* knows what he’s been through. The rumor mill must still be cheerfully spinning, coming up with ever more tragic and scandalous possibilities to fill the gaps he’s left empty in his story, but none of them come even close to the truth.

All at once, Luo Binghe finds himself hating Gongyi Xiao. Just a little bit. Until now he’d only seen him as a problem to be solved, an obstacle to be removed, but-- This *act* of his is beginning to grate on him. His kind and flawless persona, warm hearted and sweet to everyone he interacts with. Helping Luo Binghe, sympathizing with him…

If he only knew the truth of his nature, he wouldn’t deign to *look* at Luo Binghe. He’d hate him, like any righteous cultivator would.

“And besides,” Gongyi Xiao continues after clearing his throat a little, “I doubt that the Old Palace Master would disapprove. He seems to think very highly of you.”

There is no trace of unease or discontent as Gongyi Xiao offers this piece of information up. He hasn’t realized yet that Luo Binghe being liked means something bad for him.

“Oh?” Luo Binghe asks. “He’s talked to you about me?”

“Only briefly,” Gongyi Xiao says. “If it weren’t for you, I would have taken first place at the survival event during the Immortal Alliance Conference, you know. I stood no chance against you.”

He says this without bitterness or resentment, the picture of a graceful loser. Luo Binghe doesn’t trust it. It’s easy enough to quietly seethe with a smile on your face. It is news though, to learn just how far up in the ranks Gongyi Xiao actually was. Second place…

“The event grew very chaotic towards the end, with the demon attack,” Luo Binghe says. “If there had been no interference, then I’m sure Gongyi-shixiong would have fared better.”

“Ah, nonsense. Isn’t it a bit petty to blame external factors? Besides, I don’t really mind. Second place is high enough for me.”

He says that like winning and losing isn’t binary, as if it isn’t either one or the other.

Luo Binghe is about to say something - probably some more hollow praise, complimenting Gongyi Xiao’s apparent humility - when they’re interrupted. The entire way they’ve walked, people have sent greetings in Gongyi Xiao’s direction, respectfully acknowledging their Head Disciple. But they were quiet, polite, and often even silent greetings, not demanding his time or attention. Easy to ignore and walk past, in other words.

This is different.

“Gongyi-shixiong!” a woman calls out in a voice like she’s never even *heard* of the concept of an ‘inside’ voice. Heads instinctively turn towards the noise, but no one actually looks surprised - as if this is a common occurrence.

A young woman is quickly making her way towards them, leaving everyone around her to get out of her path or get trampled. She’s wrapped up in delicately pink robes, and expensive golden ornaments decorate her hair, flattering the sweet features of her face. All in all, she’s dressed much like a gentle butterfly. It would almost be a convincing impression if it weren’t for the viciously barbed metal whip coiled up at her hip.

“Fu-shimei--” Gongyi Xiao says, his eyes widening at her swift approach. He seems to reflexively move to brace himself for impact, and Luo Binghe sees why a moment later. She doesn’t throw her arms around him the way Qin Wanrong had. She *crashes* into him like a woman who doesn’t feel pain, like someone who hasn’t spared a single thought for their landing, like a two hundred pound dog that still thinks it's a puppy.

Gongyi Xiao grunts and staggers, supporting both of their weight. Seemingly completely unself-conscious, the young woman squeezes her arms around him with a *crushing* affection.

“Where have you *been* all day?” she demands, and there’s an undeniable note of complaint and accusation in her voice. “You weren’t in your room, and you weren’t in the library either!”

“I’m plenty of other places every day, Fu-shimei,” Gongyi Xiao protests. His eyes dart towards Luo Binghe, and he starts to move as if trying to break the woman’s hold on him.

She doesn’t seem to notice his efforts, her grip firm as iron. They’re still out in the open, but passing people barely spare the ongoing spectacle a glance.

“You should *tell me* when you go to other places, then, so I can find you,” she gripes. “Or leave a message! Am I really supposed to hunt all over Huan Hua Palace for you?”

“Would you please let-- ah, Fu-shimei, let me-- have you met Luo Binghe yet?” Gongyi Xiao says, a note of desperation in his voice.

“No,” she says. She wrinkles her nose a little. “Is he someone important?”

“He’s *right there,”* Gongyi Xiao says. He finally succeeds in breaking free of her hold, and takes three rapid steps back from her. She looks around herself a little skeptically - before her eyes snag on Luo Binghe.

He gives her his warmest smile, making it reach his eyes. Anyone who thinks something so simple is a sign of sincerity doesn't know how easy it is to memorize a few facial expressions.

“This,” Gongyi Xiao says, “is Luo Binghe. He’s new to our sect, so please be welcoming to him. He’s a very talented cultivator, and the winner of the survival event at the last Immortal Alliance Conference. Luo Binge, this is Chen Fu - our Little Palace Mistress.”

Ah, Luo Binghe thinks. *So this is her.*

Qin Wanrong’s comment about being whipped takes on a new light now. When she’d initially mentioned that, he’d imagined the Little Palace Mistress *ordering* people whipped. Apparently, she’s willing to do her own dirty work.

The woman he needs to seduce to fulfill his plans sweeps her eyes over him, blatantly taking him in. Luo Binghe lets her. It can only help for her to get to properly see him.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he says, friendly.

The Little Palace Mistress frowns at him, and then turns to Gongyi Xiao.

“Weren’t *you* the winner of that event?” she demands, ignoring Luo Binghe.

Gongyi Xiao, who had taken a step back as if to give them space, goes still.

“No,” he says blankly. “No, I was *second* place.”

“Yes, but the other one died,” the Little Palace Mistress points out matter of factly. “Which makes you the winner.”

“That’s *not* how it works,” Gongyi Xiao insists.

“It’s called the *survival event,”* the Little Palace Mistress says, stressing the last two words, as if this is a simple concept that she needs to spell out for him. “If he didn’t survive then that’s not winning, is it?”

She speaks these fantastically tactless and unsentimental words without a lick of shame or self awareness, not even bothering to lower her voice first.

“He *survived!”* Gongyi Xiao bursts out, gesturing towards Luo Binghe. “Look! There he is! He won first place! Luo Binghe!”

She squints at him suspiciously.

“... Are you sure?” she asks. “I heard he died.”

Luo Binghe realizes that he must be looking at the very last person in all of Huan Hua Palace to learn about his miraculous return from seeming death. She has heard zero rumors, has participated in no gossip, and hasn't been told a single thing.

That… implies quite a lot.

"That has been the popular understanding for many years now, so Fu-shimei can hardly be faulted for thinking so," Luo Binghe says, casually adopting Gongyi Xiao's name for her. "It was a… misunderstanding, however. I survived the Immortal Alliance Conference, but could not return to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. Now, Huan Hua Palace Sect has offered to take me in out of the generosity of your hearts. You have my gratitude."

The Little Palace Mistress looks at him for another moment, as if making up her mind about something… before she humphs and crosses her arms, puffing up a little.

"Well, you'd better be grateful," she says, haughtily taking it as her due. "Thanks to us you get to live in a *palace* instead of in a grubby cave on some mountain. You're welcome."

Luo Binghe is vividly reminded of ten year old Xie-shimei, magnanimously dismissing the Head Disciple from her service.

"They don't live in *caves* on Cang Qiong Mountain--" Gongyi Xiao protests.

"How would you know? You've never been there! Or did you read it in one of your books?"

"They live in *buildings,* Fu-shimei. Buildings."

The Little Palace Mistress' expression is clear: *I'll believe it when I see it.*

"Whatever," she says. "Will you come and spend time with me now?"

"Ah…" Gongyi Xiao says uncertainly, looking first at her and then Luo Binghe. "I'm afraid I do have to help arrange something for Luo-shidi first. Maybe later--"

"Or you could come with us," Luo Binghe swoops in. "That won't be any trouble, would it, Gongyi-shixiong?"

There's only a small pause before Gongyi Xiao says, "Of course not. Fu-shimei is welcome to accompany us, if it won't be too boring for her."

"Fine. So long as it won't take too long," the Little Palace Mistress grants.

"Thank you for gracing us with your presence," Luo Binghe says, a line that should only ever be spoken with a thick coating of sarcasm. He says it sincerely, however, and as he suspected the Little Palace Mistress seems to take it in that spirit.

"You're welcome," she says, and then loops her arms around one of Gongyi Xiao's, like a dainty maiden.

"Fu-shimei," Gongyi Xiao says, his eyes darting towards Luo Binghe again, embarrassed. He tugs at his arm, but she doesn't release it. He might as well be caught by an iron shackle for all the give he has. The Little Palace Mistress ignores him, launching into a story which seems to mostly be complaining about how incompetent and unhelpful and stupid people have been today, and all the inconveniences she's had to put up with so far. She seemingly forgets Luo Binghe's existence almost immediately.

Well. He could hardly hope to break a lifelong unspoken engagement with a single charming smile, could he?

Luo Binghe walks alongside them, observing. It's a good opportunity to get to learn the Little Palace Mistress' personality first hand, and to see what her relationship with Gongyi Xiao is like.

The more she speaks, the clearer the picture in his mind becomes. As they walk, people automatically make way for them in a way they hadn't even for Gongyi Xiao, their Head Disciple. They give more of a berth than is strictly necessary or respectful, and they move quicker than they need to. It is almost as if, Luo Binghe thinks, there is a tiger roaming freely on the palace grounds. A tiger without any guards who is indulged at all times, her every whim catered to, never scolded or punished - and never spoken to honestly either. She speaks without tact or shame, because no one has ever taught either to her. She is simply allowed to do or say as she pleases, no matter how foolish, cruel, or immature it makes her seem.

The Little Palace Mistress lives in one of the most lavish and crowded places Luo Binghe has ever seen, and yet she has all the social skills of a lady kept ensconced and isolated in a single room for her entire life. A room in which she has everything she could possibly wish for, soft silks and golden jewelry and sumptuous foods, but… no human company.

Except for Gongyi Xiao. As she complains he keeps cutting in to make excuses for the people she's insulting, coming up with different possible generous explanations for their behavior. In some cases, he outright disagrees with her. He looks flustered at having his arm held, but he doesn't flinch away from her.

The Qin sisters had said that the Little Palace Mistress *adores* Gongyi Xiao. Seeing them like this… Luo Binghe isn't surprised that she does. How couldn't she? He seems to be the only person in the entire palace willing to touch the tiger, whether it is to gently scold it or pet it. Of course the tiger loves him.

"And then she spilled my *tea* on me, so I had to go and get changed *again!"* the Little Palace Mistress recounts, incensed.

"Don't you think that could have been because you were threatening her? Scared people don't have the most steady hands," Gongyi Xiao says. "... Although, doing it *twice in a row*... That's a bit much."

"She was doing it on *purpose,"* the Little Palace Mistress seethes.

"Or she's just clumsy," Gongyi Xiao volunteers. "Either way, I suppose you *should* get yourself a new handmaiden. Again."

“I should whip her,” the Little Palace Mistress says vengefully, something that she apparently likes to say quite often.

“I very much appreciate it that you didn’t,” Gongyi Xiao says firmly. “Fu-shimei is so calm and self controlled.”

“I *am,”* she agrees like a wounded martyr, not a hint of irony to her.

Luo Binghe chuckles, and both of their heads turn towards him as if they’re startled to find a third person tagging along on their private walk. The Little Palace Mistress frowns at him as if he’s intruding, and Gongyi Xiao straightens self-consciously, his expression going deliberately blank.

“What,” the Little Palace Mistress demands, as if she strongly suspects that he’s laughing at her.

“Ah, nothing, please don’t mind me. I was only thinking…” Luo Binghe tilts his head. “The two of you have such a strong bond. It’s sweet.”

Predictably, this makes the Little Palace Mistress preen smugly, which confirms to Luo Binghe that he just complimented the thing that she values most in the world. He really does have a challenge in front of him, then - but that’s fine. He can handle it. He’ll just have to make sure to make it so that liking *him* and liking *Gongyi Xiao* are not mutually exclusive things for her… until it becomes necessary for it to be so. It will have to happen gradually.

“We suit each other,” the Little Palace Mistress agrees with enormous self satisfaction.

“We’re good friends,” Gongyi Xiao says. He’s holding himself a little stiffly, like now that he’s been reminded of their audience he wants to break free of her hold on his arm again.

“Oh, really?” Luo Binghe asks lightly. “I’d heard you were engaged. My mistake.”

“We’re not,” Gongyi Xiao says. “Engaged. Someone must have gotten confused.”

“Who said that?” the Little Palace Mistress asks keenly.

“I don’t remember,” Luo Binghe says. “I just overheard it, really.”

“Well, we’re not,” Gongyi Xiao repeats. “Fu-shimei and I are *friends.”*

“Best friends,” the Little Palace Mistress corrects.

“Right,” Gongyi Xiao says. “Yes.”

“I see,” Luo Binghe says mildly. It’s interesting how insistent Gongyi Xiao is on that point. Shouldn’t he *want* an engagement with the Little Palace Mistress? It would firmly secure his position as the heir of Huan Hua Palace, even more so than just being the Head Disciple.

“Oh, look,” Gongyi Xiao says, “there’s Hallmaster Hou! Just who we needed to talk to.”

Gongyi Xiao immediately ups his pace, towing the Little Palace Mistress along with him. He leads them directly towards a tall man with wispy facial hair who seems to be in the middle of scolding a cowering disciple who looks somewhere around sixteen years old.

"--told you to *keep it down* after curfew," Hallmaster Hou is saying. "It is deeply inconsiderate to keep your fellow disciples up at all hours of the night just because *you* can't sleep."

"I'm sorry!" the disciple says, throwing the apology out like a shield. He looks near tears. "I didn't mean to, Hallmaster, I just--"

"This is the *sixth time* I've had complaints--"

"Hallmaster Hou," Gongyi Xiao greets politely, as if he hasn't just walked onto a scene that everyone else in a twenty feet radius seems to be desperately pretending not to notice. He gives a pleasant smile to the tearful disciple. "Cai-shidi. Is there an issue?"

He tosses out the disciple's name without hesitation, like knowing the name of some random young disciple is only a matter of course. Luo Binghe wonders how he knows it. There's simply no way that he knows *every* disciples name, because that number must go up to the *thousands.*

Hallmaster Hou looks irritated to be interrupted, but he stiffly reigns himself in - and even goes so far as to smooth away his scowl once he sees the Little Palace Mistress attached to Gongyi Xiao. The disciple looks ready to burst into tears out of sheer relief.

"None that I don't have in hand," Hallmaster Hou says. "You don't need to trouble yourself, Head Disciple Gongyi."

"Is it the nightmares again?" Gongyi Xiao asks, looking as if he already knows that the answer is yes.

"I'm sorry," the disciple apologizes again. "I-- I'm really trying not to, to--"

"You can't will yourself into not having nightmares any longer, Cai-shidi," Gongyi Xiao says with a kind, reasonable voice. "That sort of thing can only really be helped with time."

Hallmaster Hou looks *supremely* unhappy about this interference, his lips thinning.

Ah, Luo Binghe thinks. *Found you.*

He *knew* Gongyi Xiao couldn't be universally beloved and adored.

Cai-shidi sniffles, wiping his nose with his sleeve.

"But it's been so long since that mission," he says. "It's already been months and months."

"There's no rushing it," Gongyi Xiao says soothingly. "It will take as long as it takes."

“And in the meanwhile, none of the other students in the Silver Dorm will be allowed to sleep soundly either?” Hallmaster Hou bursts out.

Cai-shidi flinches, but Gongyi Xiao swoops in before the disciple gets the chance to start apologizing again. Luo Binghe is quickly getting the sense that this isn’t the first time they’ve gone over this argument - hence Gongyi Xiao already knowing Cai-shidi’s name.

“If Cai-shidi’s nightmares are truly so disruptive, then there really is only one proper solution,” Gongyi Xiao says. “He must be given a private room.”

“Absolutely not,” Hallmaster Hou says at once, as if he was only waiting for the suggestion to be made. “What has he done to earn it? I can’t reward this sort of behavior. Before you know it, we’ll have dozens of disciples copying him, all to get their own rooms.”

“It isn’t as if we don’t have enough of them,” Gongyi Xiao points out. “Really, what else is there to be done? Either the other Silver disciples will have to get used to the nightmares, or Cai-shidi must be given his own room. Or do you suggest that we give *everyone else* their own rooms, and leave Cai-shidi alone in the Silver Dorm?”

Hallmaster Hou looks ready to say something to *that,* except the Little Palace Mistress barks a laugh.

“How inefficient! Cai-shidi technically wouldn’t be getting rewarded then, hm? Everyone else would be, for being such nice and quiet sleepers. Gongyi-shixiong is too funny.”

Unable to say something to contradict the Little Palace Mistress, Hallmaster Hou is left temporarily speechless. Gongyi Xiao takes advantage of the opening.

“It doesn’t need to be a permanent state of affairs,” he says. “Cai-shidi can have a private room for as long as it takes for his nightmares to properly fade, so he can peacefully share a dorm with his fellow disciples again. Does that sound agreeable?”

Cai-shidi, who has spent most of the argument looking much like he’s been desperately wanting to bury himself into a hole, nods desperately. “Yes! Yes, that would be-- it sounds agreeable, Gongyi-shixiong! I-- I don’t mind sharing a dorm with the others, I really don’t… It’s just that I keep waking everyone *up,* and I--”

“You don’t mean to,” Gongyi Xiao finishes for him. “Of course. This is a situation where no one is at fault, and so no one needs to be punished. We just have to find a good solution. Hallmaster Hou, I can make the arrangements for the change in Cai-shidi’s accommodations, with your permission. I’ll let you know where I place him.”

“... How *generous* of you,” Hallmaster Hou says after a long moment.

“Thank you, Hallmaster,” Gongyi Xiao says graciously. “You’re too kind. I’ll also be arranging a room for Luo-shidi here.”

Hallmaster Hou’s gaze snaps towards Luo Binghe, who gives a respectful bow as attention lands on him.

“I apologize for the trouble,” he says dutifully.

“Is at least *he* paying the room fee?” Hallmaster Hou asks.

“No,” Gongyi Xiao says simply.

Hallmaster Hou sucks in a breath, but then the Little Palace Mistress *stomps her foot* on the floor.

“This is taking so *long,”* she complains, shamelessly childish and bratty. “Gongyi-shixiong, you said this wouldn’t take much time!”

“Ah, I’m sorry, Fu-shimei,” Gongyi Xiao says. “I thought it wouldn’t, but Hallmaster Hou seems to be dragging it out for some reason…”

The Little Palace Mistress levels a *glare* at the Hallmaster, who promptly goes pale underneath her attention - and Luo Binghe realizes that this must be deliberate. This is a *routine* that the two of them do together. It’s proven by just how utterly unsurprised and satisfied they look as the Hallmaster quickly concedes the entire argument, agreeing to let Luo Binghe and Cai-shidi both get their own private rooms. He then leaves in something that very much looks like a huff, leaving the four of them to their victory. Cai-shidi bows to and thanks Gongyi Xiao profusely, who politely waves the entire thing off as if he hadn’t done much at all.

“Could you find me later in the day?” Gongyi Xiao asks. “I’ll have your new room ready for you by then, but I have other business to attend to first.”

“Of course, Gongyi-shixiong! Thank you, Gongyi-shixiong!”

Half a dozen more grateful bows later, and they finally manage to successfully detach from the disciple and are on their way again.

“So annoying,” the Little Palace Mistress mutters.

“He’s just a little awkward, that’s all. He’ll grow into himself,” Gongyi Xiao says, although he looks relieved that the encounter’s over with. “But thank you for not saying it in front of him.”

“You’re welcome,” she says, in a tone that very much says that it was only for Gongyi Xiao’s sake.

“Are there often problems like that with Hallmaster Hou?” Luo Binghe asks.

“It… comes up now and again,” Gongyi Xiao says diplomatically. “He’s not the most sympathetic man.”

“You complain about him often enough,” the Little Palace Mistress says. “You should just get daddy to fire him already.”

“I’ve broached the topic of perhaps transferring him to a different position before, but… Well, he comes from an important family. If he gets moved or fired then he won’t be the only person who gets upset. Your father advised me that it would be for the best to keep him where he is and just take care of any minor issues that come up as they arise. He’ll retire eventually.” A little fatigue slips into Gongyi Xiao’s voice at the end there, betraying how long he thinks he’s going to have to wait for that day, and how many more ‘minor issues’ he’ll have to take care of during that time.

If disagreements like that are a regular occurrence between Hallmaster Hou and Gongyi Xiao, then the man must truly *loathe* him. Those kinds of people never take well to their authority being infringed upon. Luo Binghe wonders just how many other people Gongyi Xiao has to *disagree with* on a regular basis.

Until now, he’d seemed like a warm and friendly Head Disciple, mostly preoccupied with making sure that he’s well liked and popular across the sect. Apparently, that’s not the case. There’s no way that he doesn’t know that Hallmaster Hou must surely hate his guts, and yet he hadn’t hesitated to push to get what he wanted.

“I hope I didn’t cause too much trouble for Gongyi-shixiong,” Luo Binghe says.

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” Gongyi Xiao quickly assures him. “I *do* outrank him, really. He’ll just be in a bad mood - and when *isn’t* he in a bad mood?”

“If that stupid little man makes trouble for Gongyi-shixiong then he needs to tell Fu-shimei at *once,”* the Little Palace Mistress says menacingly, one of her hands going to hold the handle of her whip.

“Of course, of course,” Gongyi Xiao promises insincerely. “--Ah, here we go. I was thinking that Luo-shidi could perhaps get a room in this wing of the palace?”

They’ve been walking the entire time they’ve been talking, and Gongyi Xiao has led them to a part of the palace that’s less… *overwhelmingly* ostentatious and more *moderately* ostentatious. There’s only *some* gold gilding and a *few* jade statues. It’s not on the ground floor, and there’s a feeling like this space isn’t meant for the public. It’s a hall interspersed with closed doors on one side, the other wall taken up by windows that face out onto the sprawling maze of gardens outside.

“It’s all private residences here,” Gongyi Xiao explains, stopping at one door to slide it open. “But none of the rooms in this hall are taken at the moment, so you won’t have to worry about any nosy neighbors.”

The room Gongyi Xiao reveals is less of a *bedroom* and more of a *suite.* Looking inside, Luo Binghe has to turn his head to one side to see the canopy bed taking center stage in the bedroom, and then turn it all the way to the other side to see what seems to be a cozy living room with a tea table and seating. There’s a door that presumably leads to a bathroom, and characteristically gaudy and expensive art on the walls. It’s bigger than the entire woodshed Luo Binghe used to sleep in and the hovel he and his mother lived in before that combined. It is, without a doubt, the largest living space he’s ever been able to claim as ‘his’ that he’s had in his whole life.

“It’s… very impressive,” Luo Binghe says. “Are *all* the private residences this large?”

“Ah, well… Size can vary. They’re not all identical.”

There’s simply no way that this is on the *smaller* end. Even with how endlessly large Huan Hua Palace is, it just wouldn’t be feasible. Gongyi Xiao isn’t just giving him a room of his own, but a *nice* one.

It makes a part of Luo Binghe instantly wary and suspicious of a trap, hidden intentions. What does he want? Why is he going out of his way for a stranger like this? What is he *up to?*

Luo Binghe reminds himself of the way Gongyi Xiao had argued for Cai-shidi’s behalf, and spent presumably hours of his time on training Xie-shimei. Whatever Gongyi Xiao’s motivations are, this is the sort of thing that he seems to just *do* as a habit. Perhaps he’s overly concerned with his reputation, or he likes to indiscriminately gather favors from people, or… he just does it because he wants to.

The Little Palace Mistress gives the room a single dismissive glance before declaring, “It’s so small.”

“Fu-shimei,” Gongyi Xiao sighs.

“Well, it *is.”*

“It’s all a matter of perspective, I suppose,” Luo Binghe grants. “Thank you for helping me get a room, Gongyi-shixiong - and you too, Fu-shimei.”

The Little Palace Mistress preens a little at being included, and Gongyi Xiao gives that polished, perfect Head Disciple smile of his.

“It was only my duty, Luo-shidi,” he says. “If there is anything else that you might need help with, please don’t hesitate to ask me. I’ll make sure that someone will provide you with some more clothes, instructions for where to find the dining area, and other basic necessities.”

“Gongyi-shixiong is most considerate,” Luo Binghe says, perfectly filial and courteous.

“Not at all,” Gongyi Xiao says, perfectly humble and dutiful.

“Are we done *now?”* the Little Palace Mistress asks impatiently.

Luo Binghe laughs before Gongyi Xiao can scold her. “Yes, I’m sorry for the hassle. Don’t let me keep you two any longer. Fu-shimei must grace me with her refreshingly honest presence again sometime soon.”

The Little Palace Mistress gives him a suspicious look, like she’s trying to figure out whether she’s being mocked or not. He smiles warmly at her, bows, and goes into his room, closing the door behind him.

There is a beat outside of his room, and then departing footsteps. Then, when they've gone far enough away to be out of the earshot of a regular *human* cultivator, the Little Palace Mistress speaks.

"What does *he* want?" she asks.

So he had, at the very least, managed to make *some* sort of impression on her past the dazzling presence of her precious Gongyi-shixiong. There's a pause before Gongyi Xiao answers her, as if picking his words carefully.

"You should give him a chance, Fu-shimei," Gongyi Xiao says quietly. "Luo Binghe is… he's someone special."

The Little Palace Mistress makes a skeptical noise, but doesn't argue. They don't speak again until they're far enough away that Luo Binghe wouldn't be able to hear them anyway. He is left alone in a large and beautiful room, with nothing but all the things he's seen and heard to dwell on. All day he's been on the lookout for weaknesses, flaws, and any information at all that he could find on the people around him - *especially* Gongyi Xiao. By now, he has a long list of opinions, suspicions, and possibilities in mind. He has many thoughts about Gongyi Xiao.

For the first time it occurs to him that while he's been looking at Gongyi Xiao, the Head Disciple has been looking right back at him. With those impenetrable dark eyes of his, that obscure and practiced smile that reveals nothing but what is allowed…

He hadn't really stopped to wonder what *Gongyi Xiao* might think of *him.*

He's someone special.

What is *that* supposed to mean?

Chapter End Notes

- In this case, GYX does call LPM 'Fu-shimei' instead of 'Chen-shimei' to denote a closer relationship. He draws the line there, though!

A Pale Imitation

Chapter Summary

It is on his fifth tranquil day living in Huan Hua Palace Sect that the Old Palace Master invites him for tea.

He accepts, obviously.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 4.2k words long.

Luo Binghe spends the next several days familiarizing himself with Huan Hua Palace.

He visits the infirmary daily, to let them monitor his injuries. They're continually impressed by his quick recovery, but not incredulous. At one point he lets himself heal too much between visits, and has to use his claws to rake new wounds in place of the old ones, carefully healing them until they reach a more appropriate stage.

He explores the halls of the palace until he has an internal map of it in his head that he can reference. Large swathes of it are murky or completely blank, forbidden territory that a lowly disciple like him isn't allowed to casually enter, such as the Water Prison that dwells underneath the golden surface of the palace. He'll have to fill it out in time, taking his opportunities where he finds them.

He walks the gardens until he learns on his own how to read the waymarkers hidden in the cobblestones - the Qin twins are inordinately impressed by this feat.

Most importantly of all, he lets his face become known. People get plenty of opportunity to point and stare at him as he wanders and explores, and he pretends not to notice. Sometimes they approach him, with various excuses prepared, just for the chance to gawk at him up close. Some especially bold ones ask questions, trying to find out which version of his story is the real one. He dodges these questions mostly with tragic looks off to the side and veiled implications that could mean almost anything but nonetheless fire up the imagination.

He hasn't seen hide nor hair of the Golden Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace since the day he arranged his accommodations for him. It could just be coincidence. He is no doubt a busy person with many tasks to take care of, and the palace grounds sprawl large and endless. If

neither of them seek the other out, then it's perfectly believable that they haven't stumbled across each other since then.

And Luo Binghe hasn't given Gongyi Xiao a reason to start avoiding him yet, anyway. That will come later.

It is on his fifth tranquil day living in Huan Hua Palace Sect that the Old Palace Master invites him for tea.

He accepts, obviously.

A quiet, beautiful woman with golden ornaments shaped like wrought flowers in her hair leads him into a part of the palace that was previously forbidden to him, the guards quietly letting him pass now that he's being escorted by her. Luo Binghe follows silently, his eyes observing the way the decorations change after a certain point. No longer graceful jade statues or delicate vases, but a monster's skull mounted on the wall, or a fearsomely large claw that's been wrapped in golden bands studded with rubies. Like what is being shown off isn't any longer just opulent wealth, but opulent wealth *and* martial prowess.

He's taken deeper and deeper inside of this new section of the palace, until he's finally led into a tea room that looks fit to host the emperor. The wooden walls are artistically scorched, a series of burned silhouettes telling the cyclical story of a battle between a cultivator and a demon that wraps around the full length of the room. The table is carved with a hypnotic pattern. The tea set is artistic, broken shards mended together with lines of gold.

The Old Palace Master is already waiting for him, seated by the table and sipping at his tea. Luo Binghe enters and bows, and the woman who led him here leaves and closes the door behind her without a word.

"Luo Binghe," the Old Palace Master says warmly. "Please, come and sit."

"Shizun," Luo Binghe greets politely, and does just that. The Old Palace Master crinkles an approving, grandfatherly smile at him for his filial obedience.

It is a privilege to be invited to address the Sect Leader of Huan Hua Palace in such a way, as if he is the man's personal disciple. It is an honor to be invited to privately have *tea* with him. The question, then, is *why* Luo Binghe has been afforded either of these things. He has in no way proven himself enough to have earned such things yet, has not impressed or dazzled. So far, he has only *intrigued.* That is different.

"You have had some days to adjust to our Huan Hua Palace," the Old Palace Master says. "How are you settling in?"

"Very well, Shizun, thank you for asking," Luo Binghe answers. "Everyone has been very friendly and welcoming, and my injuries are healing nicely."

"Good," the Old Palace Master says, with all appearances of sincerity and satisfaction. "Good. Have some of your tea, young Luo."

His tea has already been poured for him. He takes and drinks it without hesitation. The color is pale, the texture smooth, the taste gentle and subtle. He senses nothing amiss. His blood does not begin to burn and simmer in his veins, the way it does when it's trying to boil out poisons and impurities.

He has no reason to suspect poison, but it is where his mind always goes when someone hands him food or drink unprompted. It only had to happen once to become something he braces himself for every time.

"It's very good," Luo Binghe says.

"Have as much as you like, the pot is full. Is there anyone you've been getting close to in particular?"

"I haven't had enough time to get close to anyone," he says, deciding not to mention the ever friendly and beautiful Qin sisters who seek him out almost every day. "I met your daughter once while I was looking for the Head Disciple, and she was very charming."

The pride of a flattered father settles comfortably on the Old Palace Master's shoulders. "Yes, she is quite something, isn't she? No one is as striking as her."

Striking is certainly one word for it.

Before Luo Binghe can think of something more appropriate to say, the Old Palace Master's expression wrinkles slightly with thought.

"What were you looking after young Gongyi for?"

"I needed help arranging somewhere for me to sleep, after I was discharged from the infirmary," Luo Binghe explains.

The Old Palace Master hums, his brow furrowing further. "You shouldn't have had to chase him down for that. He should have already thought to make all necessary arrangements ready. Smoothing out the wrinkles of any issues with special circumstances like yours are the duty of the Head Disciple."

Luo Binghe could defend Gongyi Xiao here. He could point out that the man probably hadn't predicted how quickly Luo Binghe would be released from the infirmary, or that he'd hastened to amend the error the moment it had been pointed out to him.

But why would he do that?

"I'm sure it must have just slipped his mind," Luo Binghe says mildly instead.

The Old Palace Master gives a dissatisfied grunt. It's… interesting. Luo Binghe hasn't actually *started* the process of sabotaging Gongyi Xiao yet. Why is the Old Palace Master being so quick to pick out this minor error of his? Is this how he always treats his Head Disciple, or has there been a recent disagreement between them? He's seen no evidence of either possibility so far.

Things keep being so *easy* with the Old Palace Master, and Luo Binghe wants to know why. He wants to know what the hitch is, how this apparent advantage might be the noose that hangs him.

"... This master hasn't only invited young Luo here for pleasure," the Old Palace Master says, visibly shaking off his consternation with his Head Disciple. "I wanted to ask you if there is anything you might want to say to your old sect, before I let them know of your survival."

Luo Binghe goes still.

This is not a shock. This is not a disaster. This is an eventuality that he has already considered.

Of course Huan Hua Palace Sect would like to alert Cang Qiong Mountain Sect of his presence and survival, so they can claim to have handled matters only with honor and honesty. If they keep him a secret, then they open themselves up to suspicions over their motivations and accusations of foul play. Huan Hua Palace has a darker reputation than some other sects thanks to their infamous Water Prison, and the many confessions they've wrung out of prisoners with torture. Have they been keeping him only to squeeze him for information on their rival sect? How *long* have they been keeping him? How willing of a visitor is he? Are *they* the reason he disappeared so suddenly in the first place? Many scandalous stories could be spun up around such mysterious behavior.

Cang Qiong Mountain Sect was always going to eventually learn of Luo Binghe's continued survival. It's a part of the plan, it's necessary. He doesn't intend to spend the rest of his life in the Demon Realm, or skulking about like some lowly rogue cultivator. He has plans, goals, *ambitions.* He is going to rise so high that *everyone* will know his name.

It's just that it's happening a bit early, is all.

"... Shizun, I don't think that's necessary," Luo Binghe says, putting down his tea cup. He puts on his best pained expression, as if he has been stabbed but is trying not to show it. "They never really thought I was dead. It's just something that they say."

A lie. Shen Qingqiu no doubt thought that he was throwing Luo Binghe down to his death. The fact that this wasn't so will be nothing but an unpleasant surprise to him.

"That may be so," the Old Palace Master says gravely. "But I intend to let them know that *we* know as well now. They must live with the discomfort of others being aware of their wrongdoing."

Luo Binghe thinks. The later Cang Qiong Mountain Sect learns of his survival, the better. Because as soon as they *do* learn of it, there will be a reaction. They will be expected to explain themselves, to give a satisfying answer for why exactly Luo Binghe was declared dead in the first place. *Shen Qingqiu* will be expected to defend himself. And put in that sort of corner, he will have a perfect explanation ready: the truth.

He won't have to lie. He won't have to dress up the facts even slightly, to apologize, to open himself up to censure. He will be able to tell the world that he discovered that his disciple

was a demon in disguise and immediately struck him down for it, and he will be met with nothing but support and understanding. Not a single cultivator will disagree with his actions. As a Peak Lord faced with a demon, he chose the only path that was correct and righteous. If he faces any criticism at all it will only be for not having succeeded in striking a fatal blow.

Luo Binghe must prepare for this, must brace for this. He must build his reputation as a righteous and respected cultivator so much that people *will not* believe Shen Qingqiu's story. He must grow until people will believe his word over that of an established Peak Lord, and will refuse to ever believe that *he* could possibly be a half demon.

He's not ready. It's only been five days. It's too early.

Luo Binghe looks across the table at the Old Palace Master and his grimly set expression, clearly having already made up his mind to do what he thinks is best - and he plays the only card he has left.

As he inhales, he makes his breathing hitch. As he exhales, he makes it shudder, waver. His shoulders tremble. He blinks, and a tear slips down his face.

Luo Binghe cries.

The grim resolution and the Old Palace Master's face melts away immediately, washed away by a wide eyed surprise. Luo Binghe rushes to wipe at his tears, turning his face away as if to hide, taking a deep, shuddering breath as he visibly tries to compose himself.

"I-- I'm sorry, Shizun," he rasps, tucking his hands away beneath the table. One last, errant tear slips free. "But I would-- I would go so far as to *beg you* not to inform Cang Qiong Mountain Sect of my survival. I'm too ashamed to face them. Please, don't bother them about me. Please."

It's a heartbreaking performance. Luo Binghe knows it is, and he can see it in the way the Old Palace Master's face softens with pity at the sight of it.

"My boy," he says, and he has never sounded more like a grandfather, "you don't have to fear them. You're under Huan Hua Palace's protection now."

"It's not about that," Luo Binghe insists, his face wet, eyes bright. "I just-- not now. Not yet. Can you please… Can you wait until I'm an experienced cultivator? Until I'm *accomplished.* Maybe then, I can bear to…"

There is a long moment of silence as the Old Palace Master looks at him, taking him in. Then he gives a long, gentle sigh and nods. Luo Binghe's heart swells with triumph.

"Very well," the Old Palace Master says. "I understand. You want to be able to face the sect that wronged you with pride, to be able to prove them wrong. I will wait."

"Thank you," Luo Binghe says feelingly. "I-- I truly appreciate it, Shizun. You have my eternal gratitude."

The Old Palace Master smiles. "Please, think nothing of it. Have some more tea."

Luo Binghe nods and does so, wrapping both of his hands around the cup to keep it steady - he's meant to be trembling with emotion, after all.

It's very rare that he pulls a stunt like that. In his experience tears inspire disdain, not mercy. He wept at the gash that opened into the Eternal Abyss, and that hardly convinced his *Shizun* to stay his hand, now did it? But he took a chance here, and it seems to be paying off.

"... I apologize greatly for that display," he says once he's set his cup down.

The Old Palace Master waves him off. "Ah, it's fine. Youths feel things deeply. There is no need to feel embarrassed to cry in front of this master."

Luo Binghe gives a small, bashful smile. Then he takes a deep breath and straightens his back, his expression going firm.

"I *do* want to become an accomplished cultivator," he says. "And so - please, with Shizun's permission - I would like to be allowed to go on a mission."

"Now?" The Old Palace Master asks, raising his eyebrows. "It is not so long ago that you were wounded by a demonic beast, young Luo."

"The healers say that I'm recovering very well," Luo Binghe argues. "Please, Shizun, let me prove myself. It doesn't have to be a solo mission! I'll be happy to go with a group if you like. Just… I'd like to prove myself to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect and… and to you. Huan Hua Palace Sect has been so kind to me. *You* have been so kind to me. I want to repay you."

The Old Palace Master looks straight at his set, determined expression, but somehow his eyes seem like they're focused somewhere else entirely.

"So ambitious…" he says quietly.

Luo Binghe waits, and the Old Palace Master seems to drift out of wherever he'd gone only a moment later.

"Very well," he says solemnly. "You will take a few more days to rest and recover, but once you are done you will be sent out on a mission. You will go with a team, and you *will* lean on your fellow sect members if you overstrain yourself."

"Yes, Shizun," Luo Binghe promises. "I won't let you down."

"Good," the Old Palace Master says firmly, nodding.

And then he adds: "Head Disciple Gongyi will go with you."

Before Luo Binghe departs, the Old Palace Master presses a small jade token into his hand, stamped with a character that's been filled in with gold.

“This will allow you to come to this part of the palace without an escort,” the Old Palace Master says indulgently. “You don’t have unfettered access to all of Huan Hua Palace, but that sort of thing is earned with time and hardwork, hm?”

Luo Binghe had thanked him and left, and immediately sunk into deep thought. His steps are slow and meandering, his eyes unseeing as his mind goes every single word and gesture that was exchanged during that talk.

He’s missing something. There’s no two ways about it. It’s not that things are nonsensical, but rather that he’s missing whatever key piece that will make everything snap into meaning. Why is the Old Palace Master so… so *fond* of him? So protective, so indulgent? You would almost think that Luo Binghe might be the man’s long lost beloved grandson, with the way he acts.

It’s a puzzle. Unsolved puzzles have always itched and nagged at Luo Binghe, pricking at him until he tears them apart and he’s left only with the satisfaction of a solved mystery.

As he walks, he restlessly strokes his thumb over the jade token he’s been given - another inexplicable gesture of favor. He passes the occasional cultivator, servant, or guard as he walks, but it’s far less crowded here than it had been in any of the other parts of the palace he’s been in until now. Restricted access. No one does more than glance at him, as soon as they see the token in his hand.

It’s after he’s found himself taking a wrong turn on his way out without anyone stopping him that it occurs to him to… take advantage. He’s allowed to be in this part of the palace now; why should he just meekly walk out at once? He should take this opportunity to fill out his mental map. If anyone catches him at it, he can say that he became lost and was only trying to find his way back out. All of the lavishly decorated and gilded halls of Huan Hua Palace look so similar that it would be a believable lie.

And so Luo Binghe explores this previously forbidden, unlocked piece of Huan Hua Palace, his jade token in hand.

There are many rooms and halls to discover here. He finds a trophy room packed to bursting with the treated body parts of demonic beasts, what appears to be a strategic war room with a sprawling map of the continent carved into a table placed in the middle of it, a grand office with an unreasonably large desk, an armory with ornate weapons so proudly displayed that it seems like its more for show than anything else, an interior garden, a private library, and a linen closet.

The more he explores, the more it seems to him that this must be a place where the Old Palace Master receives important visitors. Ambassadors from other sects, respected cultivators, and the higher ups of Huan Hua Palace. Good to know, but hardly anything of importance.

He’s just about to give up the task and move on when he finds it.

Just like with all the doors before, he stops for a moment to sense whether or not someone is already inside. Once he’s satisfied, he slides the door open quietly and slips inside - and

stops.

First off, this is not a trophy room. It is not a war room, or an office, or an armory. It is, of all things… a shrine. It is a grand thing, the entire room centered around it. It is made of the palest jade, and its characters are pure shining gold. It drips with fresh flowers lovingly arranged, and incense burns readily. There is a sword displayed on it, unsheathed so that its cold and sharp edge can be appreciated. The pommel has a golden tassel attached to it, but the black handle is well worn, as if the sword saw much use once upon a time.

The shrine reads: *Su Xiyan.*

Above that, there is a portrait. It is of a handsome woman with a cold, severe expression, her shoulders broad and her hair voluminous. The golden medallion that Gongyi Xiao now wears hangs around her neck, an engraved flower in its center.

Luo Binghe understands who he is looking at. This is her: the former Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace Sect. The one who died so tragically that the Old Palace Master refused to have her replaced for over ten years. It has only been five days since Luo Binghe came here, and yet he's already heard more of the story. That she was stolen and killed by the Demon Emperor himself, who was in turn sealed underneath Bai Lu Mountain by a coalition of the four great cultivation sects for his crimes.

He looks at her and thinks: *Ah. I understand now.*

She looks exactly like him. Or rather, he looks exactly like her. They have the same jaw; the same mouth; the same nose; the same hair. The eyes and the brow are a little different, but it's still an uncanny likeness. When the Old Palace Master saw him, he must have felt like he was seeing a ghost. The ghost of his beloved Head Disciple, taken away from him too soon…

So that's why Luo Binghe has been favored so much. It really was because of foolishness… and sentimentality, which is the same thing. Well, it doesn't matter. He'll take advantage of it all the same.

But something else niggles at him. He furrows his brow and turns his head to the side, searching for it, for whatever it is about her face that's bothering him… and then he sees it.

She doesn't just remind him of himself, but someone else as well. He can see Gongyi Xiao in her too. Where Luo Binghe lacks the delicate shape of her eyes and her elegant brows, he can find Gongyi Xiao instead. The resemblance is enhanced by the fact that she's wearing the Head Disciple robes, the medallion - and that she wears her hair in the exact same style as Gongyi Xiao.

Luo Binghe wonders if that's a mere coincidence, a deliberate and calculated choice by Gongyi Xiao, or something the Old Palace Master encouraged himself.

As he looks at the portrait, an understanding is starting to dawn on Luo Binghe. By all evidence, Gongyi Xiao has always been favored by the Old Palace Master and all of Huan Hua Palace as an extension of that, to the point of even being as good as promised the sect

leader's very own daughter. A perfect and Golden Head Disciple, who just so happens to have a passing resemblance to the tragically lost and beloved Su Xiyan.

But not as much as Luo Binghe resembles her. So, the imitation is being replaced by an even greater imitation. Gongyi Xiao is old news, and now suddenly the Old Palace Master is picking away at his smallest mistakes, dissatisfied where before he had only been proud and indulgent.

This is, undeniably and objectively, a good thing. The Old Palace Master is *already* inclined to favor Luo Binghe over Gongyi Xiao, with zero groundwork or nudging needed from Luo Binghe. It is as if circumstances have already been helpfully arranged for him here at Huan Hua Palace to allow him to achieve his goals as effortlessly as possible. He can make progress on his plan even when he isn't actively trying to do so.

But he can't just rely on that. He never would have survived the brutal depths of the Eternal Abyss or the cutthroat and merciless courts of the Demon Realm if he were willing to depend on something so immaterial as the fondness of a sentimental old man and a coincidental resemblance to a dead woman. Would the Old Palace Master truly replace his current Head Disciple with no legitimate excuse? When Gongyi Xiao still has the support and admiration of the rest of the palace, and the Little Palace Mistress' adoration?

No. No, he wouldn't. Sentimentality or no, the Old Palace Master never would have become Sect Leader to Huan Hua Palace in the first place if he made foolish decisions like that. He will, at most, be generally frustrated with Gongyi Xiao for not being Luo Binghe, and soothe himself by inviting Luo Binghe to more tea visits.

That is not what Luo Binghe fucking wants. He doesn't want a doting grandfather, whether or not he's the Sect Leader. He is going to *be* the damned Sect Leader, and that means that the position of Head Disciple has to be his.

Luo Binghe looks up at the portrait of Su Xiyan, her face cold and fierce. For a tragically lost and beloved dead Head Disciple, she looks a lot more heartless than he would have imagined her. The portraitist didn't try to soften her at all, to give her a gentle smile or kind eyes. She looks ruthless. Ambitious. Like there's nothing at all that she wouldn't be willing to do to get what she wants, and no one she wouldn't be willing to sacrifice for it.

In that way, she doesn't resemble Gongyi Xiao in the slightest. He could have stood to have learned something from his predecessor. Maybe then… but no. This was always going to end with Luo Binghe winning.

He won't accept any other ending.

The Mission Gone Wrong

Chapter Summary

> Luo Binghe spends the next four days dutifully ‘recuperating’, and is finally given a clear billing of health by the healers. The very next day he is informed that he’s been assigned a mission, and to report to the Northeast Gate at dawn.

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is 8.7k words long.
>
> This chapter has some content warnings in the end notes for those that would like them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe spends the next four days dutifully ‘recuperating’, and is finally given a clear billing of health by the healers. The very next day he is informed that he’s been assigned a mission, and to report to the Northeast Gate at dawn.

He arrives neither too early or too late, but right as the first rays of the sun are cresting over the horizon. There he finds three disciples around his own age already waiting. One of them he recognizes as Tang Enlai, one of the disciples who had been part of the patrol group that had first found him by the river. The other two are women he’s never spoken to before, but who introduce themselves promptly as Shao Wenling and Han Xiaodan. Luo Binghe greets them both warmly, and then looks around as if searching for someone.

“Where is Gongyi-shixiong?” he asks. “I thought he would be coming with us.”

“He will,” Shao Wenling answers. Her hair is up in a practical updo that doesn’t leave any chance of it getting in her way or being pulled at. “He’s just a little delayed.”

“Does he have a habit of being late?” Luo Binghe asks. Gongyi Xiao had seemed more responsible and dutiful than that…

“Sometimes,” she says. “It depends on whether or not--”

“There they are!”

Luo Binghe turns around to see Gongyi Xiao approaching, two bags slung over one shoulder, and towing behind him - ah. The Little Palace Mistress. She looks barely awake and extremely unhappy about it, even if her hair and clothes are still immaculate. If anyone else

were dragging her around by her wrist, they'd probably soon quickly find themselves minus one hand.

Behind him, he hears bitten back noises of dismay at the sight of her.

"I told you so," Han Xiaodan whispers to Shao Wenling. "He's only ever late when he has to wrangle *her."*

Before any more muttering can be done, the two of them are upon the rest of the group.

"I hope you all weren't waiting for us too long," Gongyi Xiao greets them. "There was some… last minute packing to do."

"Not at all, Gongyi-shixiong!" Tang Enlai quickly assures him. "We hardly had to wait at all."

"Gongyi-shixiong, Fu-shimei," Luo Binghe greets with a nod.

The Little Palace Mistress squints at him, looking like she's hardly keeping her eyes open. Gongyi Xiao lets go of her wrist.

"We've already delayed enough," Gongyi Xiao says. "If we're quick, then we'll be back home by tomorrow. Let's go."

Everyone agrees readily, and they're off. They don't take horses, because they'll apparently be passing through some narrow terrain at certain points. They don't just fly on their swords at once either, because there are restrictions on who is allowed to fly and under what circumstances directly around Huan Hua Palace. Supposedly, if all of the cultivators who are constantly going in and out of Huan Hua Palace were to do so while flying there would be *collisions* due to how crowded the airspace would become. And so instead there are rules in place in an attempt to restrict just how many cultivators are flying at any one time around this absolute hub of activity. Their group's mission is important but not *urgent,* and so they don't have permission to fly until they've gone far enough away that they can't see the palace any longer.

As they walk, there isn't much conversation to start. Shao Wenling and Han Xiaodan walk closely enough to each other that he thinks that they're probably close friends, and everyone here is close enough in age for there to be a rapporte. But the Little Palace Mistress has the expression of an ill tempered bear woken early from her hibernation, each of her steps hitting the road just a little too forcefully, and it has a dampening effect upon the group. Everyone besides Gongyi Xiao gives her a wide berth, as if to preemptively stay outside of whipping range.

So of course Luo Binghe makes sure to draw up next to her. She's in a bad mood, but he has to prove to her that he can be an exception as well. That like Gongyi Xiao, he isn't afraid of her.

On the other side of the Little Palace Mistress, Gongyi Xiao steps away to the side, as if to politely give the two of them space. The Little Palace Mistress instantly spoils this gesture by

reaching out and yanking him back into place with one hand at his elbow.

“Where are you going?” she asks suspiciously.

“Fu-shimei,” Gongyi Xiao says, sounding flustered and yet unsurprised. “I was just-- I thought I’d go and check on the others.”

“The others are *fine,”* she dismisses. “They’ve just been walking. Don’t fuss so much.”

Gongyi Xiao sighs, before darting another look at Luo Binghe. He gives the Head Disciple a smile.

Now that he’s looking at him more closely, there are some dark smudges underneath his eyes. Signs of too little sleep, or poor sleep.

“Why is Gongyi-shixiong being sent on such a boring mission anyway?” the Little Palace Mistress grumbles, and Luo Binghe looks away from Gongyi Xiao’s gaze. “You’re the Head Disciple, so shouldn’t you just be getting sent to important things?”

She’s not wrong. If Huan Hua Palace were to be said to have a specialty that isn’t ‘be the richest sect’ then that would be their illusion array. All along the border of Huan Hua Palace’s massive territory, an illusion array wraps protectively around them. It is an expertly made thing, a testament to skill, knowledge, and coordination on a truly impressive scale. Any who walk into it are instantly dragged into its spell, the world warping around them as their senses are fooled, made to walk an inescapable maze until they either starve or are taken mercy on. Without the guidance of a member of Huan Hua Palace Sect that has been taught to navigate it, none but the most skilled of cultivators could possibly hope to escape it. It is beautiful, intricate, massive, and hopelessly complex.

And so, of course, it requires near constant surveillance and maintenance to make sure that it doesn’t collapse in on itself. It is a behemoth and an abomination both, and a significant amount of effort has to be put into making sure that it stays up at all, let alone continue functioning.

It really is worth all of that effort, however. Not only is Huan Hua Palace Sect famous for it, but it allows them near absolute control of their borders. None may enter or leave without their permission. For the most part, the surrounding towns and cities have accepted this. It only means a little extra hassle for them, having to be patiently escorted through the arrays by orderly Huan Hua cultivators - and in exchange, they get infinitely more protection from demons, beasts, and various bandits and criminals.

And that’s another thing: the prisoners. It is very, very rare that there is ever an escape from Huan Hua’s Water Prison. It is rarer still that these escapees make it off the grounds of Huan Hua Palace. And then for those prisoners to get past the illusion array at the edge of the borders? It has never happened before. Or at least if it has, then it was quickly hidden.

The border array keeps people both in *and* out, after all.

And so, the illusion array is both a powerful and delicate thing that constantly needs to be checked up on and repaired. This is the glorious mission they have been sent out on: routine maintenance.

“If I only ever get sent out on the most exciting missions, I’ll grow out of touch,” Gongyi Xiao says good naturedly. “Besides, there is a good reason why we’re being sent together. The part of the array that we’re being sent to inspect and repair is as far from the palace as you can get; if we fly as much of the way as we can, then we’ll be lucky to only have to camp out here for one night. The farther out we go, the less we’ll be able to rely on reinforcements in case of any unforeseen emergencies. It is also only a few miles away from an Abyssal Tear, even if it is a monitored one. In such circumstances, it would be unsafe to send a group any smaller than half a dozen.”

“That still doesn’t mean that you had to be sent,” the Little Palace Mistress grumbles. “It’s beneath Gongyi-shixiong to do work like this.”

She doesn’t bother to try and lower her volume at all, so that everyone else in the group gets to hear her insult the job everyone here had been chosen to do.

“You’re just in a bad mood because you had to wake up so early,” Gongyi Xiao says. “I told you that you didn’t have to come with me. Someone else could have--”

“No,” the Little Palace Mistress says, crossing her arms. “The palace is so *boring* when you go away. There’s no one to talk to.”

“You mean there’s no one you *want* to talk to,” Gongyi Xiao argues.

“It’s the same thing.”

Luo Binghe twists his head over his shoulder, and says, “I can’t see Huan Hua Palace any longer. Does that mean we can start flying now?”

Gongyi Xiao checks as well, and then nods. “Well spotted, Luo-shidi. Yes, we might as well mount our swords now, if we want to make good time…”

The Head Disciple hesitates, his sword in his hands.

“What is it, Gongyi-shixiong?” the Little Palace Mistress demands.

“Is something wrong?” Luo Binghe asks.

“Ah, no, just… Fu-shimei, I’m feeling a bit tired,” Gongyi Xiao says, an apologetic smile on his face. “I haven’t been sleeping very well lately. I know I normally help you, but I’m not sure I’m willing to take the risk with you right now. Perhaps one of the others could take you instead?”

Luo Binghe realizes that the Little Palace Mistress doesn’t have a sword. She has her barbed metal whip coiled and ready at her hip, but he can’t see any other weapons on her at all. That’s… curious. A spiritual sword is the default weapon of choice for all established cultivators. Breaking this tradition can either hugely benefit or disadvantage the cultivator in

question, and so it is a rare choice. One either does it because they're desperate and have no other options, or because they're in a position to comfortably make such a risky choice. The Little Palace Mistress is, undoubtedly, of the latter type. Who would dare tell her no?

He hasn't seen the Little Palace Mistress fight yet. For all he knows, her fearsome reputation comes from the fact that no one would ever dare block or dodge one of her blows in the first place, and so would instead be forced to stand there and take her punishment. But if she has any skill with the whip at all, then she's likely a fierce opponent for anyone more used to fighting other sword wielders. But, well…

Even if she has bonded with her whip as a spiritual weapon, that doesn't mean that a *barbed metal whip* is the sort of thing that you can comfortably fly on. Once he thinks about it, that's a pretty significant disadvantage. No wonder he's never seen another cultivator wielding a whip before.

Which means that whenever she needs to fly, she has to be carried by someone else instead… Normally Gongyi Xiao, apparently. Except not this time, as he's seemingly unwilling to take her up into the air while fatigued.

Upon Gongyi Xiao's declaration, the Little Palace Mistress scowls. Tang Enlai, Shao Wenling, and Han Xiaodan all immediately go stiff and look anywhere else, as if hoping not to be noticed.

Luo Binghe, knowing an opportunity when he sees one, swoops in before any of his hapless teammates can be commandeered instead.

"You can ride with me, Fu-shimei," he volunteers, taking Xin Mo from his hip.

"Fine," she mutters petulantly, with the air of someone being forced to accept a paltry consolation prize. After a plaintive look from Gongyi Xiao, she reluctantly adds, "thank you."

It's not exactly an ideal attitude for her to have, but Luo Binghe will work with what he has. Everyone quickly gets ready to fly in formation, Gongyi Xiao taking point. He offers to carry the Little Palace Mistress in his arms, but she waves him off distrustingly, instead wrapping her arms around him from behind. As he lifts up into the air her grip is just a little too tight, as if she thinks he's going to pull straight into a risky maneuver. He makes sure to keep Xin Mo's flight steady and smooth, and lays one of his hands on her arm in reassurement.

"I won't let you fall," he promises.

"You'd better not," she threatens. "Or else I'll strip the skin off your back with my Meigu Ci!"

'Meigu Ci' being her whip, he assumes. She really does remind him very much of some of the demons he's met. Well, there's nothing for it but to prove his words with his actions. He'll pry trust out of her iron grip eventually.

They fly. It's a clear and blue day, neither too cold or too hot, and the wind cuts briskly past them as they tear through the air, their robes and hair rippling behind them. They stop only the once to eat. They could simply practice inedia, but it's probably just to give everyone a break from the roaring wind in their ears and the dullness of a long flight as much as anything else. The rations are salty and tough to chew, and the Little Palace Mistress acts as if she's being force fed pig slop, grimacing martyrishly after each bite.

Luo Binghe had to eat far, far worse things than this in the Eternal Abyss, but he also can't quite help but agree with her just a little. If one has the *choice* and the *resources* to make good food, then why not do it? He knows that rations are made for their longevity above anything else, but that still doesn't mean that their taste and texture have to be *this* underwhelming. He can think of half a dozen different ways to improve what they're eating.

Next time he goes on a mission with the Little Palace Mistress, he'll have to make sure to bring some prepared food with him.

The rest of their flight is uneventful. The sun isn't quite setting but close to kissing the horizon when Gongyi Xiao calls out above the whipping wind, "We've reached the destination! Begin to descend!"

They all follow him down to the earth, Shao Wenling sighing with relief and Han Xiaodan outright crouching down on the ground as they land. They'd all pushed further than they perhaps would have bothered if it weren't for the fact that they're all trying to get this nothing mission over with as quickly as possible. Luo Binghe holds the Little Palace Mistress' hand for her as she steps down off his sword as if she's exiting a carriage, and she allows it with an air of arrogance.

It's interesting, the way she reacts. Sometimes gestures of politeness elicit skepticism and distrust. Other times, she acts as if it is only an expected matter of course that she should be treated with such courtesy. It paints the picture of a spurned and yet pampered princess. Flattery and presents are at once as commonplace as air and water to her, and yet may also be regarded with wary and hostile suspicion. Neither reaction is desirable.

Luo Binghe is starting to think that he might have to change his strategy with the Little Palace Mistress - which has mostly so far been cautious, delicately probing. His instinct is to pamper and sweetly romance her, but she might be too spoiled for that to have any effect at all.

He remembers comparing her to a demon earlier. Demons like to be *challenged,* don't they? It's a thought to consider.

They've landed in a nondescript, wooded area that doesn't distinguish itself in the slightest from its surroundings. Luo Binghe looks around curiously, wondering how Gongyi Xiao managed to pick it out as their destination at all. Knowing Huan Hua Palace Sect, it's probably some small trick again, like with the waymarkers hidden as decoration in the pavingstones. Something hidden in plain sight.

"Alright," Gongyi Xiao says briskly. "Shao and Han-shimeis, you're our array experts here. The rest of us will guard your backs while you're occupied."

“Yes, Gongyi-shixiong,” a slightly off tempo chorus responds, and everyone moves into position.

Shao Wenling goes down on one knee while Han Xiaodan jumps back up on her sword to fly a few feet higher up, and they both reach into the air as if to pluck at invisible guqin strings. Luo Binghe tilts his head, as if he might be able to see what they’re touching at another angle - and he circulates his qi so that just a *touch* of his demonic qi can get into the mix. He’s been keeping it tightly compacted and hidden until now, and so it flows eagerly into place.

It’s just enough for him to be able to see the glowing lattice lines of the illusion array that the disciples are inspecting. As they touch it, the strings get brighter, lighting up in response. It is an *incredibly* tangled mess. Luo Binghe watches the way the strings connect and knot and crisscross, and he manages to follow some of them down into the ground. Are the array circles buried *underneath* the ground? That’s… certainly a way to keep them hidden, actually. Saboteurs would have to find and then dig them up before they’d be able to damage them.

Tang Enlai is posted up by Shao Wenling and Han Xiaodan, hand on his sword and expression grimly set, as if he might be called upon to defend his fellow disciples' backs with his very life. It would almost be alarming, if it weren’t for how idly Gongyi Xiao seems to be wandering as he ‘keeps an eye out’, and how the Little Palace Mistress is outright sitting on the ground as she fixes her hair from their flight. No one here, except for perhaps Tang Enlai, is seriously expecting to be attacked. This is routine maintenance after all; nothing ever actually happens.

Luo Binghe considers the situation, and thinks: *not yet.*

An hour passes without incident as this section of the array is meticulously checked for tangles, knots, fraying, or any breaks. They make minor adjustments as they go, tugging glowing lines into place, and it makes it all look marginally less chaotic - although Luo Binghe sees them almost immediately starting to incrementally drift out of place again. It’s like bailing water out of a leaking boat, an endless task that can never be *done.*

As this happens, Luo Binghe idly observes Gongyi Xiao out of the corner of his eye. His spine is straight, his hold on the handle of his sheathed sword comfortable and correct, and his hair and robes are perfectly in place. He’s the very picture of the Golden Head Disciple as always, but…

His movements are a little less crisp than usual. There’s an almost sluggish edge to him, like he’s at the end of a very long day in a series of long days. His eyes aren’t bright or alert but instead dull and slow, his gaze flicking towards any noises half a beat too late. He’s more quiet than he was before. There are shadows underneath his eyes.

All classic signs of fatigue, which Luo Binghe had noted earlier. Gongyi Xiao had even admitted to it himself, using it to beg off carrying the Little Palace Mistress. He slept poorly, he said - and Luo Binghe knows that it isn’t his fault. It’s the sort of thing that he *would* do, using his powers over dreams to steal any peace or rest away from his enemy, to slowly wear him down on that front. But he hasn’t. He’s been forcing himself to be careful, patient. To make Gongyi Xiao’s turn of fortunes not happen *immediately* after his arrival.

So it can't be anything to do with Luo Binghe. It could perhaps be an ongoing problem - like with that hapless disciple Gongyi Xiao had helped get a private room earlier, Cai-shidi. Intermittent nightmares. Gongyi Xiao already has a private room of his own, so no one would have to know about it, would they? Luo Binghe scents blood in the water, a potential weakness to exploit.

Gongyi Xiao doesn't look in Luo Binghe's direction at all. He keeps his gaze on the treeline instead, on his guard.

"I think we're done," Han Xiaodan finally calls out, wiping at her forehead with her sleeve. Shao Wenling stretches and shakes out her fingers, as if they've gone stiff. "No serious issues, just a couple of kinks we had to straighten out."

"Good," Gongyi Xiao says, and he looks towards the sky. The sunset is well on its way now, the sky dyed orange and purple with its descent. "It's late; let's set up camp. We'll rise early and make our way home first thing in the morning."

Everyone readily agrees to this, and camp is made. They didn't pack tents for such a short excursion and with the weather so fine, so it's mostly finding a spot with flat ground and laying out their bedrolls. The most important part turns out to be laying down a simple alarm array around the edges of their camp, which Gongyi Xiao takes care of personally after taking a single look at the exhausted set to Shao Wenling and Han Xiaodan's shoulders. Luo Binghe sees him in flashes between the trees, walking slowly as he sets down the array in a wide enough circle that they'll have sufficient warning before whatever crosses that line reaches them.

If this were Cang Qiong Mountain Sect, they'd be more likely to set down a physical tripwire connected to talismans that would activate with a noisy flash and a bang. Arrays are very specialized knowledge, and not the sort of thing that can be used in the heat of battle - outside of carefully prepared ambushes, that is. But at Huan Hua Palace Sect, everyone is apparently expected to have *some* basic knowledge of arrays and sealing. Luo Binghe is far more used to circumventing arrays than using them himself. He'll have to make sure to brush up on his knowledge; he's always been a quick learner.

"The alarm array is set," Gongyi Xiao says, stepping out of the treeline. "We should keep watch as well, though, just to be safe. We'll take it in shifts. Who wants to go first?"

Shao Wenling and Han Xiaodan outright groan; the Little Palace Mistress acts as if she isn't included in the question. Tang Enlai eagerly jumps to offer himself, and an order to the shifts is casually negotiated as everyone grumbles or volunteers.

Tang Enlai, then Gongyi Xiao, then Luo Binghe, then Shao Wenling, then Han Xiaodan, followed last by the Little Palace Mistress. They'll all try to keep watch for a little over an hour, letting them all sleep for roughly eight hours. With that decided they break for a quick meal, and then get settled for the night.

Luo Binghe only pretends to sleep, of course. He's gone days and days without any rest before, and he knows how to stay awake even as he lies utterly still. He remains perfectly

aware of his surroundings, his senses stretched out, alert and paying attention. He listens to the quiet breathing of the other disciples, and tracks their location at every moment.

He waits.

The first shift goes without incident, and Luo Binghe remains still and silent as he hears Tang Enlai make his way to Gongyi Xiao's bedroll to gently shake him awake. They exchange brief whispers, and they make the switch.

"Take my bedroll," Gongyi Xiao whispers to Tang Enlai. "It's warm."

"Thank you, Gongyi-shixiong."

Tang Enlai spent his shift silently circling their campsite, while Luo Binghe tracked his footsteps. Gongyi Xiao instead posts himself up at the edge of their campsite and stays in place, hardly moving. Luo Binghe can tell from the tempo and depth of his breathing that he stays awake, though.

Luo Binghe lies in place and waits for footsteps to approach him, for a hand on his shoulder, a whisper in his ear. For his shift to start. He waits.

And waits.

And waits.

And waits.

The certainty is a growing thing, becoming more solid with each minute that passes without Gongyi Xiao approaching him. After two hours, he is sure of it. Gongyi Xiao should have come to wake Luo Binghe up for his shift by now, but he hasn't and he doesn't, and he *keeps* not doing it. For whatever reason, he isn't waking Luo Binghe up for his shift.

Luo Binghe considers what to do, and finally decides that there's nothing for it but to take care of it himself. With a quiet sigh, he rolls over and opens his eyes--

--and sees that Gongyi Xiao isn't looking out towards the treeline, keeping a watch for anything that might approach them. Instead, he's turned towards the campsite, looking inward, at *them.* At Luo Binghe.

There is a frozen moment in which they lock eyes - and then Gongyi Xiao blinks, looking stricken at being caught. The expression only lasts for as long as a blink before it's locked away behind a mask, briskly and efficiently hidden. He nods to Luo Binghe and then looks to the side, as if he'd only happened to be glancing in his direction when he'd opened his eyes.

Luo Binghe rises from his bedroll and makes his way through the campsite to Gongyi Xiao at the edge.

"I felt I was getting too much sleep," Luo Binghe whispers. "Isn't it my turn now?"

“Is it?” Gongyi Xiao asks. “I hadn’t noticed. It can be difficult to keep track of time like this.”

Luo Binghe looks pointedly up at the position of the moon in the sky.

“It’s my turn,” he says.

Gongyi Xiao looks at him, silent and pale. In the moonlight, the bruises underneath his eyes look deeper, darker. Luo Binghe wonders if he’d actually managed to get any restful sleep at all during Tang Enlai’s shift.

“My thanks to Luo-shidi for keeping track,” Gongyi Xiao says, in that flawlessly polite way of his that doesn’t reveal a single part of his true thoughts, his true feelings.

“It’s no trouble,” Luo Binghe says. “Gongyi-shixiong mustn’t spend the whole night keeping watch; he’ll exhaust himself.”

“As you say,” Gongyi Xiao says, and he moves towards the bedrolls. Luo Binghe thinks for half a moment to offer up his own bedroll to him, still warm - but changes his mind. It might reveal that he’d been listening in earlier.

Luo Binghe gets settled in Gongyi Xiao’s former position, listening as the Head Disciple gets settled behind him. He listens to the rhythm of inhales and exhales of the whole camp, quiet sounds of life. He waits for Gongyi Xiao to fall asleep.

It takes a very long time for this to happen. Gongyi Xiao’s breathing remains too light and fast for over an hour, as if trapped at the restless edge of sleep, unable to go any further. In the end, Luo Binghe has to take that final step for him, using the lightest touch of dream magic to gently push him over that edge.

For half an hour, Luo Binghe keeps watch over his sleeping teammates, hyper aware of the slightest twitch and noise around him. Waiting.

After a long enough period of time in which nothing happens, he allows himself to move. As silently as a shadow, he slips away from the campsite and lets the treeline swallow him up. Behind him, no one stirs at his absence.

Luo Binghe had asked the Old Palace Master for a mission so that he could begin to prove himself. So he could show himself to be an impressive and competent cultivator, someone to be respected and admired. Instead, the Sect Leader had given him a mission so tame and commonplace that this would be impossible to accomplish. He suspects that this was not a slight on the old man’s behalf, but rather an unwelcome and unneeded doting gesture of protectiveness. Giving him an easy, boring mission after he’d had to spend so many days healing from his false encounter with a demonic beast.

But that’s fine, because this mission can be useful in another way instead. He knew this from the very moment that the Old Palace Master told him that Gongyi Xiao would be going with him.

With one long exhale, Luo Binghe allows his demonic qi to flow freely through his veins. After so many days of keeping it under control, it is a visceral relief to set it loose. It burns with a sweet warmth through his body, heating him up from the inside. He flexes his hands, and feels his claws extend. Cracks his jaw, feels the sharp canines there. The gentle, red glow of his demon mark stains the darkness of the night. The world becomes clearer to him, his demon eyes seeing through the dark. It is as if he's been holding his breath for weeks and only now allowed himself to breathe out.

He unsheathes Xin Mo, and it sings to him in his mind like struck glass. Its power washes through him eagerly, restless and hungry. It's been a long time since he's gone this long without drawing it, without letting it taste blood. Luo Binghe closes his eyes and focuses.

When he opens them again, he can see the string of qi glimmering in the air. He moves silently through the trees until he's standing in front of it: Gongyi Xiao's alarm array. Compared to the bloated, chaotic monstrosity of the illusion border array, it's an incredibly simple thing. Just another sort of tripwire, really. Immaterial and invisible, but the concept is the same. Something that will snag and then pull at Gongyi Xiao's mind once it activates, pulling him out of the depths of sleep and into alertness.

The illusion array that wraps around the border of Huan Hua Palace's grand swathe of territory is greatly respected across the land, but Luo Binghe had skipped past it with ease when he'd needed to. He hadn't even needed to cross it in the first place; not with Xin Mo in hand.

Bracing his stance, Luo Binghe brings Xin Mo to bear - sets his shoulders - places his feet like he's expecting to be moved - and he cuts into the air.

He cuts *into* the air.

There is *resistance* as Luo Binghe shoves his sword into a spot in the air, and his muscles strain as his blade *sinks into* it. Hot, sulfuric air whistles past him and blows his hair off his shoulders from the point of entry, like blood gushing from a wound. Gritting his teeth, Luo Binghe *drags* Xin Mo through the air, and a dark tear in the fabric of reality rips open in its wake.

He can smell the air flowing out of that gash, can taste it in the back of his throat in a way that immediately makes him want to gag. It isn't even that foul, but his body still instinctively wants to react to it. For five years, he breathed that air and no other. For five years, he was trapped in darkness. For five years, he lived in the Eternal Abyss.

Now, he opens a pocket into the depths of that nightmare at his leisure, Xin Mo his key. Luo Binghe uses his sword as a lever to pry the gash in reality open wider, until it's the right size. Finally, trembling with exertion, he removes Xin Mo from the gash. It remains stuck in place, darker than the darkness around it, whistling with wind.

Far away, from somewhere deep inside that gash, Luo Binghe can hear the cackling howl of inhuman creatures.

He's still growing comfortable with Xin Mo and its teleportation abilities, but he's managed to learn a certain amount of precision by now. He knows *exactly* where in the Eternal Abyss he's opened this gash.

Luo Binghe takes a shuddering breath and then fiercely pulls his demonic qi back into place. His claws pull in; his canines dull; the glow of his demon mark disappears; the world goes a little darker; his blood feels cold in comparison to the burn from before. Then, using the edge of Xin Mo, he opens up a cut on his hand. Reaching through the gash, his arm enters a space significantly hotter than the place the rest of his body occupies. Close to the lava river. He stands there and allows his blood to drip and splash onto the ground on the other side for a minute, and then pulls back.

He heals his hand, sheaths his sword, and turns away - bait set. He leaves the wound in reality open behind him, right inside the line of Gongyi Xiao's alarm array.

When he returns to the campsite, there is no sign of anyone having stirred. With smooth and unhurried movements, he goes to Shao Wenling and quietly shakes her awake.

"Your turn," he whispers to her. She makes a small, tired noise of acknowledgment before rising, and he goes to lie back down on his own bedroll.

Closing his eyes, he gets back to waiting.

It takes less than a quarter of an hour. Luo Binghe, lying on the ground with his eyes closed, notices them before Shao Wenling does.

It starts as a rustle in the grass, like a stray breeze might make, or a woodland animal. Then, a moment later, a giggle. It has a manic, hysterical edge to it, which is contrasted unsettlingly by how raspy and deep it sounds. There was a time that Luo Binghe had nightmares about that laughter, before he stopped having nightmares at all.

"... Who's there?" Shao Wenling calls out the second time one of these giggles ripples outwards, and he knows that she must be scanning the bedrolls, trying to see if anyone's missing. As if the first place her mind goes to is that one of them must have snuck out into the trees, and that's where the laughter is coming from.

In response even more laughter breaks out, louder this time, like Shao Wenling's question was a rock thrown into a lake, the laughter the water that splashes up. Multiple sources.

Shao Wenling wastes no more time.

"Wake up!" she shouts, drawing her sword and making it glow white light to cast back the darkness.

Luo Binghe springs to his feet, drawing Xin Mo. Everyone else follows with varying degrees of readiness, fumbling for their weapons and looking around themselves in confused panic.

The light of their swords catches on the eyes of the lurking creatures first, shining back at them from the trees. Luo Binghe counts at least eight pairs.

Shredder Hyenas always hunt in packs.

“What are those things?” the Little Palace Mistress demands, grabbing for her whip.

“How did they *get* here?” Han Xiaodan asks. “Gongyi--”

That’s when the beasts burst out of the treeline, and all conversation stops. For the first time, the group gets a good look at what they’re up against.

They’re hideous, twisted canine creatures that look like they’ve been left to grow all wrong, like a neglected garden abandoned to swallow itself up. Their skeletons stretch longer than either flesh or skin, like someone forcing their way into a costume far too small for them. Sharp bone impales through their joints and limbs, overgrown, so that when they run the sharp and broken edges of their leg bones stab into the earth, their dangling paws not even touching the ground. Their teeth don’t fit inside of their mouths, too long and too many of them, but instead jaggedly stab up and out and even *through* their muzzles in a sharp, lopsided mess of interlocking teeth. It makes them look like they’re smiling, lines of slobber trailing behind them as they sprint. To be eaten by a mouth like that would truly mean to be *shredded.*

“Don’t let them bite you!” Gongyi Xiao cries out, and then the Shredder Hyenas are upon them.

They’re creatures that look like they shouldn’t be able to live, let alone move - and yet they do, and *swiftly.* Their flesh has the regular proportions of a canine, but their skeletons turn their limbs deceptively long. Han Xiaodan screams as the first Shredder Hyena reaches her before she was prepared for it, raking the splintered end of its leg bone down her chest, blood flying.

Before it gets the chance to clamp its teeth down on her, Luo Binghe throws himself forward and swings Xin Mo with crushing force. It slices sweetly through the air before *smashing* into the Shredder Hyena’s skull, and he feels the satisfying give of shattering bone before the creature ragdolls across the ground away from him with a laughing yelp, a tumbling mess of too long limbs and bone.

All around him, the Shredder Hyenas all *shriek* with laughter, as if they think Luo Binghe just did something hilarious. The broken and injured Shredder Hyena laughs as well, getting back up with jagged movements - like it’s only been given more joints to bend, not grievously injured.

Another Shredder Hyena pounces for him with a wild cackle, but before Luo Binghe can strike it across the temple with his pommel a barbed metal whip snaps around its throat and *yanks* it to the side so that it crashes into the legs of another Shredder Hyena, downing them both. The barbs rip and tear off flesh like it's already been boiled loose from the skeleton underneath.

So she does *know how to fight,* Luo Binghe thinks, and then he has to quickly use a spiritual blast to throw another Shredder Hyena off of him.

These were some of the first creatures he'd had to fight, down in the Eternal Abyss. He hadn't been ready for them in the slightest. They'd snuck up on and surrounded him, chased and clawed him to bloody shreds, and he'd ended up *screaming* at the top of his lungs just to try and drown out their maddening laughter. He'd barely escaped with his life.

Behind him and to the side, he hears Tang Enlai cry out. Snapping his head to the side, Luo Binghe sees that the disciple has accidentally disarmed himself. Tried to stab one of the things, most likely, and only found hard bone where he'd expected to sink into soft flesh. He's frozen, panicking, and Luo Binghe moves to dive to the rescue--

A golden sword glare tears through the nightair, blinding with its fierceness, and smashes into the Shredder Hyena bearing down on Tang Enlai. Luo Binghe smells scorched flesh.

"Pick up your sword, Tang-shidi!" Gongyi Xiao shouts, his sword still glowing hot from the sword glare, and it seems to snap Tang Enlai out of his panic. His sword floats up off the ground and back into his hand.

Any hope of maintaining a defensive line has already been dashed, the attack having happened while they were still waking up and disoriented. The Shredder Hyenas run amongst them and its *chaos,* the light of their swords moving dizzyingly, the creatures' laughter ringing piercingly through the night. The noise grates at the inside of his skull, agitates something in him that makes him want to bear his teeth and snarl.

There are more Shredder Hyenas than there are members of their group, so Luo Binghe makes sure to take on at least two of them at once. Xin Mo sweeps through the air, and a dark sword glare trails from its edge, catching a Shredder Hyena paying attention to Shao Wenling instead of him. Before the hit even impacts, he's turning around to focus on another Shredder Hyena leaping straight for his face, its sharp, overcrowded maw open and gaping. Luo Binghe sees teeth and teeth and teeth. Immediately, he moves to meet that gaping razor maw, his hand going inside.

There's good reason for Gongyi Xiao warning against their bite, even as obvious as it might seem to avoid such a thing. When Shredder Hyenas bite, they never, ever let go. Their jaw strength is immense, so that they can chew through dense muscle and bone like it's nothing but so much gristle. But as dangerous as this bite may be, it is also their greatest weakness.

As soon as Luo Binghe's fingers touch soft flesh, the vulnerable meat of the inside of the Shredder Hyena's throat, he lets a spiritual blast *rip* through his hand before the creature has the time to bite down on his arm.

All at once, it stops laughing. It is *deeply* satisfying. Some of its teeth rake along his arm as it's thrown away, but he allows his body to heal the deep scratches, comfortably hidden by the chaos and the dark and the blood. When it lands with a rolling *thud,* it doesn't get back up.

One down; seven left to go.

"Shut up!" the Little Palace Mistress roars at the cackling beasts, and Luo Binghe turns in time to see her blind one of the creatures, her whip raking across its eyes and shredding them to a dripping mess. As it tosses its head and cackles with agony, Gongyi Xiao's sword flies into and impales its open mouth until only the pommel is visible between its teeth. The body spasms, and the sword comes flying back out dripping with thick, viscous blood. After two staggering steps, the Shredder Hyena collapses to the ground.

Six left.

So, Gongyi Xiao knows about that weakness as well.

Shao Wenling screams, backed up on both sides by two Shredder Hyenas, and Luo Binghe hurries to her rescue. Everything turns into a haze of screaming and laughter, splattering blood and flying bone chips, and Xin Mo hums with hungry satisfaction in his hands. He could kill these things for hours if he wanted to, but he's doing so while avoiding tapping into his demonic qi, and having to make sure that none of the disciples fighting alongside him are killed. It makes his mind and vision narrow down until the only thing he can think of is the next swing of his blade, the placement of his footwork, tracking the movements of the creatures by their maddening laughter, slashing at a pouncing Shredder Hyena before he even turns to see it. Everything but this moment fades away as an insignificant, irrelevant distraction to survival.

The Little Palace Mistress tangles up a Shredder Hyena's limbs with her whip, holding it still as Gongyi Xiao executes it.

Five left.

Luo Binghe makes a Shredder Hyena swallow his sword, and then incinerates all of its internal organs with a sword glare.

Four left.

Shao Wenling, Han Xiaodan, and Tang Enlai all overwhelm one of the creatures, hacking away at its neck with their swords in rapid turns until its head rolls off.

Three left.

Luo Binghe stabs one through the eye, the point of Xin Mo bumping up against the back of its thick skull.

Two left.

This one dives for Luo Binghe with a howl that bubbles at the edges with sick mirth, its eyes wild and rolling. He rushes to meet it - and Gongyi Xiao breaks its hind legs from behind with a savage swing of his sword. His hair is a mess, blood spattered on his robes, his eyes wide and urgent.

"Kill it!" he shouts raggedly at Luo Binghe like an order.

Luo Binghe grabs one of its teeth and uses his grip to pull its maw open. The sharp edges dig into his palm, but he ignores it and instead just buries Xin Mo as deep into the Shredder Hyena's throat as he possibly can. The sword glare that blooms out of Xin Mo's blade is enough to make its gut burst open like an animal carcass left to roast in the sun, intestines splattering across the ground.

One left.

He searches for the last straggler - sees dead bodies, all canine - sees Han Xiaodan sobbing, Shao Wenling trying to stem her bleeding, Tang Enlai collapsing to his knees - the Little Palace Mistress pointing and shouting, *"It's getting away!"*

Shredder Hyenas are pack animals. Deprived of its pack, the last straggler is now sprinting away, back into the treeline from where it first came. Towards the gash it had entered from, that absolutely no one else can be allowed to see.

"I'll handle it!" Luo Binghe shouts, already running. "Stay!"

He ends up throwing his sword down as he runs, jumping onto it and whipping across the ground without losing a step. Branches whip at him but he pursues the last Shredder Hyena with a single minded determination as it lopes ahead of him.

He ends up downing it only steps away from the gash in reality. He tackles it, lets the protruding edges and angles of its skeleton cut into him as they tumble across the ground together, and pries its jaw open with his bare and bleeding hands as it howls and yelps and *laughs* at him like a crazed, dying creature. It struggles wildly, frantically, and he *growls* down at it as he sticks his entire forearm down its throat and tears it apart from the inside with a spiritual blast.

All gone.

Gasping for breath, he quickly gets up on his feet and forces the gash closed with Xin Mo. It's harder than opening it was. He's just barely finished when he hears running footsteps coming up behind him. Luo Binghe doesn't turn around right away, hurrying to heal as much of the damage as he can before he's seen.

"You killed it?" the Little Palace Mistress asks behind him, sounding ready to finish the job for him if the answer is no.

"Yes, Fu-shimei," he answers, and lets himself turn once he feels the last of the cuts on his face close. He gives her a tired, reassuring smile, nodding down to the corpse at his feet. "They're all dead."

She doesn't immediately relax, her whip still drawn.

"What if there are more?" she asks.

"They seemed like… loud creatures," Luo Binghe says. "I think we would have noticed them."

Sheathing Xin Mo, he leans down, picking up the limp, sharp body of the last Shredder Hyena before tossing it over his shoulder.

“Let’s get back to the others,” he says.

He walks, and after a moment, she follows. She keeps her whip ready, looking all around them at the trees as if they might spew more demonic creatures out of nowhere at any moment. The rush and terror of sudden battle is still coursing through her, leaving her tense and flinching. Luo Binghe decides not to say anything; she wouldn’t appreciate any distractions from her surroundings at the moment.

Once they arrive back at the campsite, Shao Wenling is in the process of bandaging Han Xiaodan’s wounds, and Tang Enlai is speaking. His voice is plaintive and bewildered, as if he can’t understand what has happened.

“--but *how* did they sneak up on us?” he’s asking helplessly. “With Gongyi-shixiong’s alarm array, shouldn’t we have received a warning?”

He looks to Gongyi Xiao, as if for confirmation.

“Yes,” Gongyi Xiao says quietly. “We should have.”

Luo Binghe drops the Shredder Hyena corpse to the ground, the Little Palace Mistress limping behind him.

“But then why *didn’t* we?” Tang Enlai asks.

Gongyi Xiao looks at Luo Binghe, and for a moment--

--for a moment it feels as if he’s seeing right through him, can see exactly what Luo Binghe has done, as if he knows *everything*--

--but then he looks away, and the moment breaks and fades.

“I must,” Gongyi Xiao says slowly, “have made a mistake. My array was faulty. It’s the only explanation.”

The silence afterwards as everyone takes that in is suffocating. Luo Binghe lets it hang, merciless.

“Then… then if Shao Wenling hadn’t spotted them--” Han Xiaodan croaks, and then stops herself. She doesn’t need to finish.

The creatures would have been able to sneak up on them unhindered, could have slaughtered them in their sleep.

They wouldn’t have, of course. Luo Binghe would have miraculously ‘woken up’ in time to stop it. But no one here knows that.

“I owe you all my most sincere apologies,” Gongyi Xiao says. His gaze is turned towards the treeline, distant. “Due to my own fault, I endangered us all. It’s inexcusable.”

“But…” Tang Enlai says disbelievingly. “But alarm arrays are *basic.* Gongyi-shixiong wouldn’t make a mistake like--”

“What else could it be?” Gongyi Xiao asks. “It’s the only thing that could have happened, so it’s what happened. I messed up. I’m sorry. I should have been more careful, especially knowing that an Abyssal Tear is only some miles away. The pack must have slipped past the monitoring team there. I’ll include it in the report - or one of you can make the report instead, if you think it’s more appropriate.”

His grip on his sword is *tight.*

“... I’ll write the report,” Shao Wenling says.

The Little Palace Mistress *snaps her whip* across the ground, and Shao Wenling and Han Xiaodan flinch away with a scream. Luo Binghe thinks she was only aiming *close* to them, not *at* them, but it also seemed awfully close.

“You’re all,” she snarls, looking venomous and furious, *“ungrateful!”*

“Fu-shimei,” Gongyi Xiao starts.

“No!” she shrieks over him, and he stops. *“No.* They don’t get to look at you like that, after everything you’ve done! It was just *one* mistake! No one even died! If Han-shimei wasn’t so *slow,* then no one would have gotten seriously hurt either!”

“No one has said anything,” Gongyi Xiao says.

“They were *thinking it!”* she spits. “And it’s not fair! You always work so hard for everyone! You saved Tang-shidi’s *life* because he was stupid and froze up! He would be *dead* if it weren’t for you!”

Her outburst only makes the atmosphere more crushing, heavy and choking. She looks between them all wildly as if searching for the slightest sign of resistance to put out, of argument. The hand on her whip trembles with sheer anger.

Luo Binghe doesn’t think he’s ever met such an honest person in his life. Someone so willing to say exactly what she thinks and feels, no matter how painful or unwelcome or awkward it might be for everyone else to hear. This is a woman who refuses to allow the opinions or reactions of others to stop her, or to even make her hesitate. It would almost be admirable, if it weren’t so obviously to her detriment, and to the detriment of the man she’s so fiercely defending.

It would have been better for Gongyi Xiao if he’d been left to fully accept the responsibility of what had happened with no attempts to minimize or justify it. It would have made everyone feel petty and unfair for holding it against him any more than necessary, when he’s

so obviously ashamed of himself as it is. All of the Little Palace Mistress' arguments would have occurred to them naturally, and would have held all the more sway over them for it.

This, however, will only have the entirely opposite effect. Luo Binghe couldn't have done it better himself; he's not in the right position for it.

"... It is only my duty as a cultivator of Huan Hua Palace to defend my fellow sect members," Gongyi Xiao says, once the silence stretches out long enough. "No one needs to be grateful for that."

"We should rest," Luo Binghe says. It's his first time overtly asserting his control over the group. After having killed most of the Shredder Hyenas himself, and with everyone's faith in Gongyi Xiao shaken, it's the perfect moment for it to happen without remark or comment. "Shao-shimei, please finish giving everyone first aid. Tang-shidi, do you have a qiankun pouch? Use it to store the bodies; we can't leave them here. Fu-shimei, if you could please keep guard over everyone just in case… Gongyi-shixiong will go and redo the alarm array."

After a pause, he adds his finishing touch: "I'll double check his work, just to be safe."

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Graphic violence during a fight, and body horror from some monsters that are intended to be disturbing.

Rumor Mill

Chapter Summary

Think of her as a demon.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 4.8k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rest of the mission passes without incident, although the atmosphere is irreparably ruined. First aid is given, corpses are tucked away to be dealt with later, and no one sleeps well. During that entire time, conversation is minimal.

The Little Palace Mistress doesn't whip or threaten anyone, but she does become angry enough to cry at one point, which might honestly have been the worst possible option. Gongyi Xiao quietly comforts her, and she spitefully pulls her bedroll right next to his for the night, ignoring propriety.

In the morning, Gongyi Xiao tries to tell her to fly with someone else again, but she flatly refuses this time. He gives up quickly, and so the Little Palace Mistress flies on Gongyi Xiao's sword on the way back to Huan Hua Palace.

They don't stop for a break. Everyone is clearly shaken and exhausted, and only want to return to the safety of their sect as quickly as possible, and so that is exactly what they do. Even when they see the golden dome of the palace cresting the horizon, they don't descend to walk the rest of the way as they should. Instead, by wordless agreement, they fly until they're nearly upon the main gates, and *then* they descend. It's only the afternoon; they made excellent time.

Minor conversation is made to determine who will do what. Tang Enlai will help escort Han Xiaodan to the infirmary for more proper treatment; Gongyi Xiao will go bring the bodies of the demonic beasts to wherever it is in the palace that such things are taken care of; Shao Wenling will go and write down her report of how the mission went, including the extraordinary monster attack. (The Little Palace Mistress glares at her like she'd very much like to strike her down for that.)

Luo Binghe and the Little Palace Mistress are the only ones left without a task, meaning that they'll have the much desired privilege of going directly to their rooms to collapse for the

day. It's a shame that this privilege has been given to the two people least likely to use it.

The Little Palace Mistress stomps off in a direction as soon the others disperse. Luo Binghe, after a moment of consideration, follows her.

"What do you want," she snaps after a dozen feet, glaring fiercely over her shoulder at him. Luo Binghe imagines that she very much wants him to say something disparaging about Gongyi Xiao, so that she'll have a reason to flense him alive with her whip.

Think of her as a demon.

"I wanted to know what *you're* going to do," he says.

"What business is it of yours?" she demands.

"None," he admits. "I suppose I was just curious whether or not you'd go and do something stupid that would ultimately just make Gongyi-shixiong look even worse."

The Little Palace Mistress stops in her tracks. This is, most likely, the first time in her life that someone has called her stupid to her face. She seems almost stunned by it.

"Excuse me?" she asks.

"The way you charged off like that, and how you've been fuming all day," Luo Binghe explains. "It made it seem like you've maybe got something in mind?"

She turns on him properly, outrage plain to see on her face.

"You dare talk to me like this? Who do you think you are? You're just Cang Qiong Mountain's *cast-off."*

She throws the words out like a blow, like she's hoping they'll hurt him. Her second whip must be her tongue. He doesn't flinch.

"Are you going to run off to defend Gongyi-shixiong to your father, before Shao-shimei has the chance to write her report?"

From the way she freezes, that is *exactly* what she'd been planning on doing. Predictable. This is a woman who's clearly gone tattling to her father for as long as she's been able to talk.

"Because if you are, I don't think that's going to be of any help at all," Luo Binghe says. "Behaving like that only shows that you know the situation looks bad enough that you need to be defensive. It'll bring the issue to his attention in the first place, when it might otherwise pass him by. It could put him in a bad mood--"

"What do you care?" she interrupts. "You don't even *know* Gongyi-shixiong."

"... I don't," he agrees. "I've hardly spoken to him. But - so far - he's been nothing but kind to me. Why would I want him in a bad position?"

It's perhaps the filthiest lie he's made since he came here.

The Little Palace Mistress crosses her arms, sizing him up distrustfully.

"So, what? You want me not to say anything at all? To *not* defend him, and just let people point fingers at him? Like *you* did? That's not *helping."*

"Sometimes, just not making things worse is the best you can do," Luo Binghe argues. "Like you said, this was just a single mistake, and without any actual consequences. The less attention is paid to it, the less of a fuss there is, the quicker it will die down. I think the best thing would be to ignore the incident completely, to act as if it was such a small mistake that it isn't even worthy of attention or interest. Not something worth remembering."

"How convenient! The best thing to do is *nothing.* Are you sure you aren't just a coward?"

"Are you sure you aren't just a bullheaded idiot?" he fires back. "If you do something just for the sake of *doing something* then you're only really helping yourself and your own feelings, aren't you?"

Her face goes white and then red with fury, looking like she's very, *very* close to just *leaping* at him. They're both still covered in dried blood from the attack, their hair and robes windswept from their flight. No one is quite close enough to them to make out their argument, Luo Binghe thinks, but people are definitely surreptitiously glancing in their direction. By now, he knows that won't hold the Little Palace Mistress back in the slightest.

"If Luo-shixiong wants to *keep his tongue inside of his head,"* she hisses venomously, "then this humble shimei urges him to keep his mouth *shut* from now on."

And then she flounces off, people immediately moving to give her a wide berth. Luo Binghe honestly doesn't know if she still intends to speak to the Old Palace Master or not. She might, just out of stubborn spite. Or she might just go and throw a spectacularly violent tantrum, taking her feelings out on someone else.

Either way, Luo Binghe is satisfied. After all, before today he wouldn't be confident that the Little Palace Mistress knew his name at all. He's finally made an impression.

No public announcement is made about what happened, of course. Why should there be? But nonetheless, the story is known across the sect in less than a week. A group of disciples including the Little Palace Mistress, Head Disciple Gongyi, and the newcomer who is the fascination of every gossiper all leave on a routine maintenance mission, and come back exhausted and covered in blood. Who wouldn't want to know the details? Luo Binghe doesn't even need to spread the story himself. One of the others in the group does it for him, and it spreads like wildfire from there all on its own.

Gongyi Xiao made a foolish mistake. He went on a mission while he was frayed and exhausted, and he almost got everyone he was in charge of killed. Did you hear that Luo Binghe killed almost all of the monsters by himself? He fought like a whirlwind. The Little

Palace Mistress was so furious with him for showing up her Gongyi Xiao that she gave him a tongue lashing as soon as they returned to the palace. Why was Gongyi Xiao so tired in the first place? Was he sick? How irresponsible of him to go on the mission in such a state…

And so on and so on. Luo Binghe humbly refrains from participating in any badmouthing of his shixiong, and patiently offers up his advice to any starry eyed disciples asking for help with their fighting skills.

During another tea visit with the Old Palace Master, Luo Binghe had with a subdued, concerned air asked if Gongyi Xiao was going to face any punishment for his mistake - and if so, he hoped it wasn't too harsh. The Old Palace Master's expression had darkened for a moment at the reminder of his Head Disciple, before it had just as quickly cleared and he'd firmly told Luo Binghe not to worry about such things. Then he'd gone right back to praising him for his combat skills, warmly impressed with him for killing the Shredder Hyenas and giving the rattled disciples guidance afterwards.

The Old Palace Master is so dotingly fond and protective of him that it really can be more of a frustrating hindrance than a help, sometimes. *Qin Wanrong,* of all people, is the person who finally gives him a clear answer.

"He's not being allowed to go on more missions for a while," she says casually, with almost zero leading or prodding.

"Oh?" Luo Binghe asks. He had been in the middle of meditating in the supposedly serene Crystal Garden (its pond as clear as glass, strings of crystals threaded through tree branches like jewelry in a lady's hair) when she had enthusiastically greeted him by throwing herself into his lap. He's managed to maneuver her into sitting at his side instead, but she's still pressed up close. "Where did you hear this?"

"Gongyi-shixiong told me," she says innocently. "I asked him how he was getting punished for making a mistake."

That's - well. It *is* the sort of simple solution that would occur to a straightforward, shameless person who wouldn't stop to think about whether she's putting someone on the spot or not, openly asking them about something shameful and upsetting.

"How long is 'a while' going to be?"

"I don't know," she says with a shrug. "He didn't tell them how long to make the ban last."

Luo Binghe… pauses.

"Gongyi-shixiong… is the one who decided his own punishment?" he asks slowly, wondering if Qin Wanrong is confused.

"It was his suggestion," she says. "They were just going to make him kneel in repentance for a little bit, but he didn't think that was bad enough, so he asked them to forbid him from going on missions as well. He was very ashamed of himself."

“I see,” Luo Binghe says. He supposes that he’s meant to be impressed by this display of humble atonement, but he isn’t. Does he think that he’s *proving* something by taking on more punishment than necessary? He’ll only be getting more.

… It does sound like Luo Binghe won’t be getting another opportunity to sabotage him on a mission for the foreseeable future, though. Well, that’s fine. There are plenty of other angles of attack he can take.

“He’s so silly,” Qin Wanrong sighs. “Really, *everyone’s* being so silly. Is it really so serious? No one got *hurt.* A-Rong doesn’t see what all of the fuss is about. Gongyi-shixiong is so nice and handsome, everyone should just forgive him already.”

She doesn’t say it with the same venom and fire that the Little Palace Mistress had used when defending Gongyi Xiao, but it’s more or less the same sentiment. Luo Binghe is unsurprised. He’s only just started tarnishing the Golden Head Disciple, and so there are still plenty of people who still regard him with respect or affection. This is just the smallest stain on his immaculate reputation, honestly. That’s *why* people are making such a big fuss about it in the first place. This is very likely the first time a decent scandal has arisen around Gongyi Xiao, and so everyone’s eager and fascinated, ready to make as much of it as possible.

Luo Binghe intends to continue to give those people an unending feast they can *glut* themselves on.

“Let’s hope that people stop being mean to Gongyi-shixiong soon,” Luo Binghe says, and Qin Wanrong hums happy agreement, her head resting on his shoulder.

The next day, Luo Binghe decides that it’s time for him to seek Gongyi Xiao out. As before, the two of them haven’t run into each other by coincidence even once. But that’s perfectly fine, because Luo Binghe has always been able to arrange his own coincidences.

This is how he finds himself at the Goldfish Pond one golden morning, correcting a young girl’s stance and her grip on her sword. Honestly, most of her flaws seem to come from the fact that she’s overcompensating for a sword that is simply too heavy and long for her. It’s not a temporary, blunted sword meant for a learning ten year old, but instead very much the real thing.

Her possessing it at all had made much more sense to him once he’d learned that it’s possible for disciples to *pay* to access their spiritual weapons early. Childishly impatient and wanting to get an early start to give themselves an edge, dozens of disciples apparently do this every year. Ironically, it probably only ever has the opposite result. This sword, for example, is clearly meant for a body with longer and stronger limbs. It’s impressing upon her all the wrong lessons, teaching her bad habits that she’ll later have to break. Either her parents don’t know enough about sword fighting to know what they’ve paid for, or they’re the sort who throw money at their children and buy them all the privileges they can without caring to stop and consider whether or not these privileges actually *benefit* their children or not.

“And then breathe out as you release it,” he says. He breathes deeply in demonstration, and Xie Ruonlan hurries to match him.

She’s already managed to bring a faltering white glow to her sword, like a candle flame wavering in the wind. This is apparently the stage that she’s been stuck at for a while now, unable to progress any further.

With a loud exhale, the uncertain white light trapped within her blade *finally* bursts forth. It’s too loose, not tight or sharp enough, and it dissipates almost immediately, far before it would have reached any imaginary opponents. It’s more of a mist than anything else. However, her eyes go wide and round with astonishment, and she cries out, *“I did it!”*

“Way to go, Lan-er!” a boy the same age as her cheers from the sidelines - Pan Huan. It never hurts to know more names.

“It was a fluke!” another girl of the same age jeers. “I hardly saw it!”

The two kids immediately get into an argument about the size and impressiveness of the sword glare. Further away, sitting underneath a golden chain tree, some older disciples laugh at the spectacle and applaud Xie Ruonlan encouragingly.

“I knew you could do it,” Luo Binghe tells Xie Ruonlan, giving her his most charming smile. “Well done.”

She looks up at him with breathless excitement and happiness, before dropping her sword and throwing her arms around his waist.

“Thank you, Luo-shixiong! You’re the best!”

Luo Binghe is going to say something more to her, but realizes that they have new company. Turning his head to the side, he finds Gongyi Xiao standing a few feet away, taking in the scene. His expression is unreadable.

“Gongyi-shixiong,” Luo Binghe greets him warmly, as if this isn’t a deliberate ambush. “What a coincidence. What are you doing here?”

“Luo-shidi,” Gongyi Xiao greets him, and he pulls his perfect, dutiful Head Disciple smile back on. “I came here to train Xie-shimei, but…”

But I beat you to it.

Luo Binghe wonders if it stings, seeing his shimei finally learn how to make a sword glare from someone else. Xie Ruonlan had been so excited that she’d clearly entirely forgotten about her beloved Gongyi-shixiong for a second in her enthusiasm. Does he see just how easily he’s replaced?

“I saw what she was trying to do, and I thought I’d give her some advice,” he says modestly.

It hadn’t been hard, honestly. She’d already been so close to the edge of figuring it out, Luo Binghe had only needed to push her over the finish line. Swooping in and finishing a project

months in the making at the last step.

“You’re too kind,” Gongyi Xiao says.

Xie Ruonlan surfaces from her hug, dives for her sword, and turns towards Gongyi Xiao.

“Gongyi-shixiong! Did you see?! Did you see it?”

Gongyi Xiao looks down at her, and Luo Binghe watches as his smile turns more sincere by infinitesimal degrees. It’s from the way it turns just a little softer, a little warmer, a little smaller, and just slightly crooked to one side. The contrast makes his smile from earlier so much more obviously false.

“I saw it,” Gongyi Xiao says. “It’s very impressive to be able to make a sword glare so early, Xie-shimei. I’m proud of you.”

Xie Ruonlan looks ready to start glowing from sheer pride, like her sword.

“I’m going to write to mama and tell her! She’ll be impressed!”

“Ah--” Gongyi Xiao says, his smile stiffening a little. Before he can finish, Xie Ruonlan is already running over to her friends to preen and brag.

“Is there a problem with that?” Luo Binghe asks after a moment.

“What?” Gongyi Xiao asks, tearing his gaze away from Xie Ruonlan and her friends.

“You seemed unhappy when she said she was going to tell her mother about her sword glare,” Luo Binge clarifies. “Why is that?”

“I’m not unhappy,” Gongyi Xiao says. “It’s just… I didn’t realize Xie-shimei was so set on this because she wanted to impress her mother. If I’d known then I would have… I could have lowered her expectations, perhaps.”

“Her mother doesn’t care for her?”

“I-- wouldn’t go that far,” Gongyi Xiao says. “But I would say that she has… unreasonable expectations for such a young child.”

“Ah,” Luo Binghe says, understanding. What more is there to say?

He wonders if having such a parent is worse than not having a parent at all. He wouldn’t know; his own mother was never anything but loving towards him. Losing her was unquestionably a devastating loss.

Gongyi Xiao still looks tired, Luo Binghe notes. That’s not too surprising, considering what happened at that mission, and all the whispers it inspired. He’d have to be deaf not to have overheard some of it. No, Luo Binghe can see how Gongyi Xiao may be having trouble sleeping.

"... I didn't have the chance to tell you earlier," Luo Binghe says, and Gongyi Xiao looks at him. "But I couldn't help but admire the way you fought the demonic beasts on that mission. You and the Little Palace Mistress make a very good team."

"We've trained together, that's all," Gongyi Xiao says. "You flatter me; you managed to kill far more of the Shredder Hyenas than I did."

"Gongyi-shixiong mustn't dismiss his own accomplishments," Luo Binghe says. "You really were an excellent fighter; I haven't been able to stop thinking of it since."

"Well," Gongyi Xiao says, looking away. "I *am* the Head Disciple. It would be embarrassing for Huan Hua Palace if I couldn't at least fight passably well."

"Passably well is understating it. Please, Gongyi-shixiong, would you spar with me?"

There is a pause.

"Luo-shidi must mind his injuries," Gongyi Xiao says. "Weren't you ordered by the infirmary not to exert yourself?"

"I'm already considered to be fully recovered. I wouldn't have been allowed to go on a mission otherwise. Really, I could benefit from the practice. I've been resting too much."

"I see. Of course." Another pause. "Here? Now?"

"Why not?" Luo Binghe asks. "We're both present and available. Unless you have something else to do at the moment?"

Gongyi Xiao looks over at Xie Ruonlan, happily the center of attention between her friends. He came here to train her, but that turned out to be unnecessary.

"I don't," Gongyi Xiao says, before turning that fake fake fake smile at him. "Alright then. Let's spar."

Luo Binghe smiles.

This is an idea that he'd had before he ever even arrived. It's an incredibly simple one after all: to demonstrate his superior skill over the current Head Disciple in the most direct and obvious way possible. He'd had to wait until he fully 'recovered' from his injuries first, but he's ready now. It's time for him to completely and thoroughly beat - and *humiliate* - Gongyi Xiao.

"This isn't the training grounds," Gongyi Xiao says. "We'll have to be careful not to damage our surroundings, or else the gardeners will be quite upset."

"Of course," Luo Binghe grants. "And we'll keep the onlookers in mind as well."

Because there are onlookers. That's a very important part of this. Xie Ruonlan and her friends, half a dozen older disciples that look like they're idly reading together underneath the gold chain three, and two lovebirds who seem to think that they're being discreet about their

hand holding by the roses. Luo Binghe thinks he even recognizes Tang Enlai in the group of readers.

It's not a bad gathering, although it could be better. Luo Binghe would've sold *tickets* if he could, but this does need to look natural. Spontaneous, unplanned.

It's fine. The ones who see will talk.

"We'll fight to disarm each other?" Gongyi Xiao asks as they move to put a few feet of distance between them, facing each other.

"That sounds good to me," Luo Binghe says. And then, in a tone like he's just teasing, "But you're welcome to surrender too."

"Good to know," Gongyi Xiao says, not reacting like he'd noticed the joking voice. He wraps his hand around the hilt of his sword. "We'll draw on three?"

Luo Binghe grips Xin Mo. It hums eagerly underneath his palm in a way that vibrates through the marrow of his bones, but it's quiet and muffled, hidden. Controllable.

"Yes."

Behind him, Luo Binghe senses people paying attention to them, looking in their direction. Good.

"One, two, three--"

Gongyi Xiao doesn't even get the time to draw his sword. It's still sheathed when he blocks Luo Binghe's strike - which shows that his reflexes at least have their priorities straight.

Luo Binghe darts back with a playful grin, allowing Gongyi Xiao to cast off his sword's sheath. His blade gleams bright and clean, catching the sunlight in a way Xin Mo refuses to do. It reminds him, for just a second, of Zheng Yang.

Gongyi Xiao doesn't go on the offense, but instead immediately settles into a defensive stance, as if he expects to immediately be harried. Luo Binghe obliges him, treating him to two wide slashes that he easily sidesteps, backing up.

This is a balancing act, a careful show. Luo Binghe has to beat Gongyi Xiao soundly and thoroughly, but he also can't be *too* quick or overwhelming about it. If he just disarms Gongyi Xiao instantly then people might accuse him of catching him off his guard, of being a poor sport.

With this in mind, he treats Gongyi Xiao to three more rapid but telegraphed swings - before Xin Mo darts out like a snake looking to bite. Gongyi Xiao is forced to block it instead of neatly dodging or parrying, their blades sliding together with a metallic rasp. Gongyi Xiao tries to retreat but Luo Binghe pursues him, *pressing* down on him. If he can disarm Gongyi Xiao with brute force--

Gongyi Xiao's blade barely glows at all before it *erupts.* Luo Binghe is given no warning. The sword glare makes their blades *burst* apart with a shriek of metal, and Luo Binghe jumps back before it can reach his front-- but it dissipates into the air almost immediately.

Right. Gongyi Xiao had only charged it for a fraction of a second; of course it wouldn't be able to travel far at all. It was only good enough to startle their swords apart, like a firecracker. An interesting trick, but hardly a deathblow.

His eyes lock with Gongyi Xiao's almost by accident, and for a second it feels like Gongyi Xiao is going to press his advantage. Like he's going to *chase* Luo Binghe, pursue him, bear down on him sword first.

But then he doesn't. Those dark eyes of his shutter shut without closing. He shifts his footing, sliding back into a defensive stance.

Luo Binghe doesn't hesitate, because you *die* if you hesitate in the Eternal Abyss. Instead, he throws himself back at Gongyi Xiao, and they fall into a quick and frantic rhythm. Gongyi Xiao *had* been modest when he'd called his fighting skills only passable. It's clear to see that he's trained himself diligently, and his form is textbook perfect. There's nothing rough or sloppy about him, only crisp edges and neat corners. Every block, parry, and strike he makes is utterly correct, smooth and flawless. He fights like this is a dance he's already practiced, like he's giving a demonstration, like he's memorized all of the steps.

No wonder he's the pride of Huan Hua Palace. No wonder he's so respected and beloved. No wonder he's their precious Golden Head Disciple.

But he isn't prepared for fighting against Luo Binghe. No one ever is.

Luo Binghe does *not* have a textbook perfect form. He is *not* crisp and neat and flawless. He could pretend to be if he wanted, but that would be a performance and nothing else. He fights rough. He fights sloppy. He fights like a child that was chased down in the streets by older children, like a disciple who was never given a single lesson by his Shizun, who got ambushed by his seniors between classes. Like someone who had to survive in the Abyss for five long years.

He fights like he learned by *fighting.*

Luo Binghe allows Gongyi Xiao to hold his own for exactly one minute, and then he surges like a tidal wave. He savagely smashes through his guard like a hammer and then descends upon him, stepping close enough to make him flinch back.

Cut him, Xin Mo seethes, just a little closer to the surface than before.

No, Luo Binghe thinks firmly. That is not what victory looks like right now.

Despite the awkward angle, Gongyi Xiao manages to gain enough distance to bring his sword up between them again - like it's a shield, a barrier.

Luo Binghe moves to disdainfully disarm him. Almost immediately, he thinks *not going to work.* Gongyi Xiao's grip is firmer than it had appeared at a glance. He's going to manage to hold onto his sword, but if Luo Binghe immediately follows the blow up with--

Their swords meet, screeching against each other - and Luo Binghe disarms Gongyi Xiao. His sword goes tumbling off into the grass, leaving him defenseless.

Luo Binghe - blinks.

That shouldn't have happened, he thinks.

Behind him, there's an excited outburst of a cheer from the onlookers, people talking over each other. Luo Binghe doesn't turn to look. Gongyi Xiao kneels down and picks up his sword from the ground neatly.

"You won," Gongyi Xiao says, looking up at him. He smiles, and it is as false as it is perfect. "My congratulations to Luo-shidi. You fought excellently."

You let me *disarm you,* Luo Binghe thinks. Except-- except that makes absolutely no sense. *Why* would he do something like that? Purposefully throw a fight in front of an audience, jeopardizing his still recovering reputation? There's absolutely no reason, no motive he could have.

He must have just made a mistake, as simple as that. People make errors all the time when fighting. His grip must have just faltered at the last moment, unprepared for the force Luo Binghe brought to bear, or the angle that it came from. It was a simple blunder.

Except for how textbook perfect he was for the whole fight before that.

But what else could it be? Nothing else makes sense.

Gongyi Xiao rises from the ground, sheathing his sword at his side. Their audience reaches them, people coming to congratulate him on winning the sparring match.

"You were incredible, Luo-shixiong!" Tang Enlai proclaims, not even looking in the direction of the Head Disciple he had shown so much respect for only weeks ago. "Absolutely relentless!"

Luo Binghe had a vague plan to immediately challenge Gongyi Xiao to a rematch, to generously give him a 'chance' to redeem himself. He would have beat him to the ground over and over again, as many times as he was foolish enough to accept. But somehow he forgets this plan for long enough that by the time he manages to tear himself away from the effusive backpatting and praise surrounding him, Gongyi Xiao is already walking away.

He leaves the Goldfish Pond silently, like an actor exiting the stage.

Chapter End Notes

This fic now has some lovely fanart by friendodo!

The Thief That Got Away

Chapter Summary

The very next day there is a massive uproar.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 3.2k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The very next day there is a massive uproar.

Luo Binghe emerges from his room to find old and wizened Huan Hua Palace cultivators running around like headless chickens, snapping and shouting at everyone around them, and just generally panicking. Everyone else looks either scared, confused, intrigued, or annoyed.

He quickly gathers three things:

1. All the gates leading out of Huan Hua Palace are closed and locked.
2. There's some sort of array humming in the sky in a dome around the palace that makes flying seem like a very bad idea.
3. Everyone is being searched.

It's not hard to guess what's happened based on that information. Something important has been stolen. If it were just the first two things then Luo Binghe might assume that someone's escaped from the Water Prison, or that there's maybe been an assassination and they haven't found the killer yet. That last clue, however, points to an object that has gone missing, and that it is an object that everyone who knows about it would very much like to *not* be missing.

This is concerning, since Luo Binghe isn't the one who stole it. Nor did he make someone else steal it for him, nor does he know who did it or what the object even *is*. Luo Binghe does not like this. He doesn't like not knowing what's going on, because if you don't know about something then you can't be in control of it. He didn't get to measure up the potential consequences before deciding whether to intervene or not. He didn't *allow* this theft to happen.

That is why, as soon as he meets the day and sees the hectic chaos it has immediately descended into, he commits himself to finding out as much as is possible about the situation. In that way, he's no different than every single other disciple of Huan Hua Palace.

His first attempt involves directly asking someone who looks panicked enough to be in the know about what's going on. He's promptly told that he doesn't need to know, it isn't any of his business, and has he seen anyone suspicious about? Unsurprised, Luo Binghe immediately abandons the strategy that was more of an obligatory token attempt than anything else.

Before he can get started on his second attempt, a very harried looking senior cultivator barks at him to report to the dining hall at once. Luo Binghe, cautious due to ignorance and not wanting to stand out, decides to actually obey this order. If nothing else, he might learn something more.

It becomes immediately clear that in an attempt to keep track of their own vast and sprawling population of cultivators and disciples, as many people as is safely possible are all being herded to the same general area. Huan Hua Palace has never felt so noisy and crowded, but is probably an absolute ghost town everywhere else. One disciple gets the bright idea to get some elbow space for himself by floating above the crowd on his sword, immediately inspiring half a dozen imitators, before they're all viciously shouted down by the senior cultivators saddled with the task of organizing this mob into something resembling order.

"QUIET," one of them finally roars, their voice amplified by a spell. They repeat themselves until the deafening roar of the curious crowd finally dies down. "There has been a theft in the palace. Every room is being searched, and no exceptions are being made. You will all arrange yourselves into orderly lines and be searched as-- *no exceptions are being made.* Quiet! You will not be allowed to leave this area until you have been searched! That is final!"

The lines are wrangled like unruly cats being herded, everyone confused and distracted and excited.

"--going to make us *take our clothes off!?* That's not--"

"--don't think we're going to be *strip searched,* it's just a pat--"

"--probably just to keep us out of the way while they look for the *real* thief--"

"--saw guards running around everywhere--"

"--wonder what's been taken? It has to be important or else--"

"--heard it was a *demonic sword--"*

"--liar! You're just making things up! It must have been something *expensive--"*

"--and rare and one of a kind, like this special pearl I heard about--"

"--palace has a *lot* of treasure and trophies, it could be anything! It--"

Luo Binghe lets the chaotic tangle of speculation wash over him, sifting through it for anything that might be useful, although he doubts he'll find it. It's good to know what everyone *else* is thinking and suspecting, but that doesn't mean that they're anywhere near close to the truth.

Whatever has been stolen, he only knows two things about it: 1. It's small enough to potentially be hidden on the thief's own person, 2. It's important enough for Huan Hua Palace Sect to make this much of a fuss over it.

That doesn't mean that it's *important.* Overreactions happen. It could very well be that Huan Hua Palace is less distraught over the loss of the item itself, and more over the fact that something has been successfully stolen from them and they *still* haven't caught the thief. Being stolen from would be a great loss of face to any cultivation sect… which is why the way they're handling this is so very stupid.

If this were happening to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect, then none of the disciples would have heard even a whisper of this theft. Everything would have gone on as normal, while investigations were discreetly enacted behind the scenes. They would perhaps have been much less likely to successfully catch the thief with such an approach, but no one would *know* about it, which is almost as good as it not happening at all. His old sect has always been so very good at quietly whisking uncomfortable or inconvenient things out of sight and out of mind, after all. In that way, Cang Qiong has always been the irreproachable model of good tact and composure.

Huan Hua Palace Sect, by contrast, is handling this loudly, obviously, and just in general turning the entire incident into a spectacle. Immediately locking down the palace and enacting bodily searches on everyone, going through each and every room… Yes, it will give them a much better chance of actually catching the thief and recovering the stolen object - but what if it doesn't? If they *don't* catch or find anyone or anything then *everyone will know.* It will be impossible to keep such a thing hidden or quiet. People on the other side of the *country* will idly gossip about it. *Did you hear that Huan Hua Palace was stolen from? I wonder what it was. Could it have been demons? Perhaps it was an inside job…*

It is, in other words, a gamble. Someone had to make a quick decision as soon as the theft was discovered about how to handle it, and now it's too late to back out. They all have to fully commit to this approach and hope it gains them results, or else they'll be stuck with the worst of both worlds: a loss of face for the sect, without even having recovered the stolen object or apprehended the thief.

Luo Binghe doesn't know how long ago the theft happened, but assuming the shortest possible amount of time between theft and discovery… If it happened an hour ago and the thief *still* hasn't been found, then that's not promising. The longer this goes on for, the worse the palace's chances for finding the thief at all look.

He isn't holding his breath.

Luo Binghe was right. In the end, the thief is never found.

That entire day was spent on everyone being searched. Luo Binghe, his demonic qi firmly tucked away, had subjected himself to it with all due obedience and been utterly unimpressed. It had been a rushed, routine inspection, the cultivator searching him clearly more focused on getting through the long line than anything else. It's only to be expected. They had been told

to search every single disciple in that line, which had included such sinister and suspicious individuals as bored and distractible six year olds with sticky hands. Who could take such a task *seriously,* searching every single person as if they might actually be the thief?

Still. Luo Binghe can think of *so many* ways he could have snuck something through that search without having been noticed.

He comes back to find that his room has also likewise been searched with a similar attitude of rushed obligation. It hasn't been ransacked, but things are ever so slightly out of alignment. For example, they must have checked the inside of every single drawer, but then they *didn't* go so far as to check whether or not any of those drawers had false bottoms or not. If they had attempted to search each room thoroughly then the endeavor would likely take *weeks* with how sprawling the palace is.

Most likely, searches of individuals that have been deemed to be suspicious or untrustworthy are much more intensive than what Luo Binghe has experienced himself. They're also likely using other methods for searching for the item, such as divinatory items and practices.

Eventually, Huan Hua Palace has to take down the sky array that's preventing flight, and to open their gates - if nothing else, to make sure that they don't starve. They grow and slaughter much of their food within the palace, but they're still not entirely independent, and Huan Hua Palace is a hub for constant trading in general. They cannot afford to grind to a complete stop for long. With the opening of the gates there is an undeniable sense of surrender, of the search being given up. The thief got away.

People happily gossip and chatter about it for days on end, endlessly curious and excited about the stir that was caused. There is much speculation about who the thief was, and why they did it, and what they stole. All of it is speculative and unsubstantiated, baseless guesswork with no evidence to back it up.

Huan Hua Palace stiffly refuses to make any sort of announcement about what was stolen, and very pointedly refuses to acknowledge that the theft happened at all. There is the very clear impression that they'd prefer it if everyone would just go ahead and forget that the entire thing ever happened in the first place.

In the face of this complete lack of solid information, Luo Binghe turns to his strongest source of information within the sect: the Old Palace Master himself.

Ever since Luo Binghe arrived, they have very consistently met at least once a week for tea. The Old Palace Master will inquire about how Luo Binghe's studies and cultivation are coming along, and warmly praise him for his hard work and initiative. Small talk will be made, and Luo Binghe will perform appropriate filial piety, smiling politely and answering any questions posed to him. To have a good connection with the current sect leader is a very useful resource indeed, and he takes care of that relationship in the same way he might dutifully water a plant.

After the uproar of the theft, however, the Old Palace Master does not summon Luo Binghe for another tea visit. It is clear that the man is too busy for it, caught up in the hectic chaos of the scandal. Luo Binghe has no right to summon the *Sect Leader* to a meeting himself, which

means that he must wait until the Old Palace Master finds the time in his schedule again to see Luo Binghe.

Obviously, Luo Binghe does not have the patience for this.

He *can* be patient if he needs to be. He can be or do anything if he *needs to* do it. But if he has any choice in the matter, then he prefers not to be. It is as simple as that. Why should he wait when there are other options? With this in mind, Luo Binghe goes to sleep one night and Dreams.

Stripping the blood and the filth and the darkness off himself, he leaves his own dream behind himself. He has no scheduled meeting with Meng Mo tonight, and thus no reason to delay.

Traversing the Dream Realm feels a little bit like playing hopscotch, with an endless void swimming beneath each safe stepping stone. Each stepping stone is a dream, a sleeping mind. Time and distance works differently here than in the waking world, but there is still a benefit to doing this in such a crowded place. There are more stepping stones, less void between each sleeping mind.

He wouldn't have to risk the void at all if he just reached for the mind he wanted and *dragged it* towards him, but that's not what he's doing. That would only pull the Old Palace Master into *his* dream, and that's not what Luo Binghe wants. Sure, it would give him more control, and would give the dreamer less ability to resist him and his whims. But it would sacrifice what Luo Binghe wants most in this instant: *subtlety* and *information.*

When people get pulled out of their own dream, they notice it. They might not understand what has happened to them, but they remember it once they've woken. But if they never leave their own dream at all…

Luo Binghe finds the Old Palace Master's dream. Learning how to identify individual sleeping minds had been the work of years, of learning how to recognize someone by the shape of their qi and their mind instead of their face and voice. He slips inside of the dream smoothly and seamlessly, like a thrown rock that casts no ripples in the water.

The Old Palace Master is dreaming of a river. It rushes past him, dark and cold, and the Old Palace Master stalks down its shore. The reeds brush past his golden robes but he doesn't pay them any mind, his gaze glued to the ground as he looks for something. He looks and he looks, and Luo Binghe can tell that this is a dream that will end before he ever finds what he's looking for.

Luo Binghe takes a moment to consider his approach, before taking a deep breath and changing his appearance.

When he steps out of the reeds, it is as Gongyi Xiao.

"Shizun," he calls out in Gongyi Xiao's clear voice, and the Old Palace Master looks up from the ground. Confusion and displeasure clouds his expression, as if he's been handed copper when he was expecting gold. "What are you searching for? Can this disciple help you?"

“You have already done *more* than enough,” the Old Palace Master snaps, censure in his voice.

That’s… interesting. Dressing himself up in this way had almost been a whim, but it’s already teaching him something. Is this really how the Old Palace Master speaks to his Head Disciple? Since when?

“I’m sorry, Shizun,” he says. “I only wanted to help.”

The Old Palace Master scoffs.

“I can’t trust you with anything,” he says. “You’re good, but you’re not *great.* You never have been. You make mistakes. You’re *second rate.”*

Luo Binghe allows Gongyi Xiao’s features to crumple into something stricken.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “Are you looking for what the thief stole?”

“What?” the Old Palace Master asks.

“Something important was stolen from Huan Hua Palace,” he coaxes him, reminding. “We searched everyone and everything, but we couldn’t find it… It doesn’t look like we’ll be finding the thief either.”

As he speaks, the cold, roaring river behind the Old Palace Master turns into the gently trickling controlled river that threads across the palace. The vague suggestion of a golden palace instead of trees paints the background.

The Old Palace Master glowers.

“Do you have any idea how much I paid for that artifact?” he demands. “How much of a loss of face this is for our sect? For a thief to be able to pierce their way to the very core of our palace, to enter and leave the Special Artifact Room *unhindered?”*

Luo Binghe feels a pulse of satisfaction in his chest at this first sign of solid information. He knows what the Old Palace Master is talking about now.

The Special Artifact Room is exactly what it sounds like. It’s a place where the rarest and most expensive items that the sect manages to get its hands on in one way or another end up. Taken from the corpse of a defeated demon or bought with a fortune, it all counts as spoils of victory. Luo Binghe has not seen the inside of it because it is not open to the public, and it also hasn’t been a priority. He will get the time to inspect it later at his leisure, once he owns this sect completely.

This at least explains why Huan Hua Palace lost its head so much. The Special Artifact Room resides deep within the palace, and is supposedly heavily protected. The fact that someone managed to steal something from there, and then wasn’t even caught… He can see how that might be concerning. After all, if they did it once, then what’s to stop them from doing it *again?*

“This is terrible,” Luo Binghe agrees. Slowly, he tilts his head to the side. “... But why are you mad at *me,* Shizun?”

“It’s *your fault,* boy,” the Old Palace Master snaps. “As the Head Disciple, you were responsible for the security of that room!”

“Ah,” Luo Binghe says. “I see.”

He does. Huan Hua Palace Sect has searched and searched for the thief, and been entirely unable to find them. Now, in the wake of that, they will have to settle for the second best thing: someone to blame. If a dish is broken then *someone* must be punished for it.

It looks like the shame and anger and humiliation of this incident will entirely be taken out on Gongyi Xiao. Perhaps the damage Luo Binghe has already done to his reputation helped the blame flow in his direction, but it is yet another stroke of luck that he hadn’t worked for. He wasn’t the one who stole the artifact. He did nothing to try and point displeasure in the Head Disciple’s direction. It just… happened anyway. How fortunate.

Something about it puts a sour taste in his mouth, but he shrugs it off.

“This disciple knows nothing but remorse for his mistakes,” he says with a deep bow.

“Your remorse won’t fix this,” the Old Palace Master retorts, hard and unforgiving.

When Luo Binghe rises from the bow, he is wearing his own face again. He still wears the golden robes and medallion of the Head Disciple. The sight strikes the Old Palace Master silent, and he can feel how it’s a jarring enough impact to unsettle the very foundations of this dream. The dream is dissolving underneath his feet as the Old Palace Master wakes up.

Luo Binghe only smiles at him as if he were born to wear the robes of Huan Hua Palace’s Head Disciple. How much of this dream the Old Palace Master will remember is up in the air. It could very well all slip through his grasp like sand. But it can’t hurt to leave him with this last lingering image, can it?

Just to put the idea in his head, if it hadn’t been there already.

With a last rushing roar from the river, the dream breaks apart. Luo Binghe skips away towards the safe stepping stones of the sleeping minds of Huan Hua Palace, and doesn’t look behind him as he goes.

Chapter End Notes

This fic now has some gorgeous fanart by lady-dysnomia!

The Letter

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe starts to take on Gongyi Xiao's duties.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 3.7k words long.

Luo Binghe starts to take on Gongyi Xiao's duties.

Not officially, of course, and not all of them at once. He's only being helpful. Poor, frazzled Gongyi Xiao has been making so many mistakes lately, hasn't he? First the Shredder Hyena debacle, and then even allowing Huan Hua Palace to be *robbed.* Any other disciple in his place would at least have faced corporal punishment, but the Little Palace Mistress had threatened to break the arm of anyone who dared attempt such a thing. He always looks so *tired* nowadays too, doesn't he? It really does seem like he's maybe a little in over his head. He's well meaning, but… It's clear that he needs some help keeping up with his duties. Luo Binghe is only too happy to provide it.

If he happens to take on some of the Head Disciple's tasks before he even has the chance to find out about them, then that's only a coincidence.

He finds two Silver disciples arguing fiercely, looking for Gongyi Xiao to mediate a dispute between them. Swooping in, Luo Binghe resolves the matter himself.

"Gongyi-shixiong has been a little overwhelmed lately," he tells them afterward, leaning down towards them in a confidential sort of way even though he speaks at a volume a curious cultivator could easily overhear. "So let's be nice to him, okay? If you have more concerns like this, just bring them to me instead."

With Gongyi Xiao still banned from going on any more missions, Luo Binghe promptly volunteers to fill in for him on any missions he would have been sent to instead. Having very nicely demonstrated his capabilities on the Shredder Hyenas mission, everyone agrees with this solution. In less than a week, Luo Binghe is sent to eradicate a nest of Ghost Head Spiders, exterminate a pack of Ear Piercing Wasp Bats, and kill a Face Stealer.

"Ah, I have to admit," Qin Wanrong says after the last of these missions, "it's *much* easier to go on these missions with Binghe than Gongyi-shixiong."

“Oh?” Luo Binghe asks, wiping Xin Mo free of blood. “How so?”

“He’s… less direct than you,” Qin Wanyue answers for her sister. She’s wetted her handkerchief with water, and has been bashfully cleaning the side of his face for him.

He’s been gently trying to discourage any sense of ownership she may have for him due to their past connection, going out of his way to spend more time with her sister or other disciples than with her. Having her regard is all well and good - you never know when someone’s good opinion might come in useful - but he also can’t let it interfere with his ongoing progress with the Little Palace Mistress. He thinks she understands that she won’t be getting more from him, but she also insists on gestures like this when they *are* together. He tolerates them.

“Last year, a juvenile Black Moon Rhinoceros Python got lost in the Human Realm and ended up in Huan Hua territory,” Qin Wanrong volunteers. “It was just a baby, but it was still bigger than an ox! It tore through the countryside killing the animals and making trees fall down, and all the hunters were too scared to hunt when it was rampaging around, so we were sent to deal with it. Except Gongyi-shixiong kept insisting that we couldn’t kill it! He said it was just a child who had gotten lost in an ecosystem that didn’t suit it, and that its species was already in risk of becoming endangered because people keep wanting to show off by killing them.”

“We had to spend *days* carefully luring and herding it over the border back into the Demon Realm instead,” Qin Wanyue finishes. “It would have been much faster just to set up an ambush… Although, I suppose he was just trying to be kind to it.”

She sounds a little skeptical as she grants this, like she doesn’t quite understand why he’d *want* to be kind to such a dangerous beast.

“Oh?” Luo Binghe asks. He thinks of the Shredder Hyenas, and how quickly and ruthlessly Gongyi Xiao had put them down. “He didn’t strike me as a pacifist.”

“Oh, he’s not,” Qin Wanyue hurries to assure him. “He’ll kill monsters if he needs to, it’s just… if he *doesn’t* need to, then he finds some other alternative.”

“One time, we had to kill a Blood Tiger that had been stalking a village and killing anyone who left it while alone, *and* a Crystal Bear that was eating all of the livestock. Gongyi-shixiong managed to make them fight each other instead, and then we just had to execute the survivor, which was easy since it was so badly injured. It was very tricky!”

“And complicated,” Qin Wanyue says. She casts Luo Binghe an admiring look from underneath her lashes. “Binghe would have just fought both of the monsters on his own and won.”

Yes, he probably would have. He’s killed both of those creatures before, after all. Sure, he could come up with some clever plan instead, but why bother when he can just crush them? Like he’d done with the Face Stealer. He’d turned it into paste in less than five minutes while the rest of the disciples that had been sent with him stood back in reserve, gasping and

cheering with admiration. A much *simpler* solution than any of the clever schemes Gongyi Xiao has apparently come up with.

It doesn't seem to occur to anyone that if Luo Binghe weren't here to personally crush these monsters with his overwhelming might, then it would be up to *them* to do it. Gongyi Xiao's complicated, indirect and tricky plans probably avoid a *lot* of the risk of Luo Binghe's simple, straightforward solutions.

But it's so much easier to stand back and cheer as someone else takes care of it all, than to spend several days herding a dangerous juvenile monster back into its natural habitat.

"Well, if you're not confident in your fighting ability then it only makes sense to find different solutions," Luo Binghe says mildly. Qin Wanrong gives a scandalized little giggle.

When Luo Binghe arrives for his usual tea visit with the Old Palace Master, for the first time he finds someone else already with him.

It's Gongyi Xiao, of all people.

He hasn't been invited to sit. He's standing by the tea table, looking like he's either in the middle of giving a report or being dressed down - it's difficult to tell, because both him and the Old Palace Master go silent and turn towards the door once Luo Binghe enters.

If he'd known what was going on, he would have stopped to eavesdrop first.

"Binghe, you're early," the Old Palace Master says warmly. Then, the warmth dropping away from his voice, "You're dismissed, Gongyi."

"Yes, Shizun," Gongyi Xiao says with a respectful bow. He moves to leave, but he can't exit the door without Luo Binghe moving out of the way. Luo Binghe takes the opportunity to examine him up close; he's been so busy showing off his ability to do the Head Disciple's tasks for him that he hasn't had the chance to see the Head Disciple himself since their spar at the Goldfish Pond.

Gongyi Xiao continues to look tired. He looks a little paler as well, in an unhealthy sort of way. Otherwise, he is still as composed and politely closed off as ever. Hair and robes in perfect order, his expression giving away nothing as he pauses in front of Luo Binghe.

Just like when Luo Binghe disarmed him far too easily during their spar.

Just like when Luo Binghe caught the man staring at him during his watch shift on the mission.

You should give him a chance, Fu-shimei. He's someone special.

Gongyi Xiao is an obstacle to be toppled, a target to be ruthlessly removed. He will eventually become irrelevant. Luo Binghe only needs to know as much about him as is necessary to get rid of him, which isn't very much. And yet-- and *yet*--

“Luo-shidi,” Gongyi Xiao says with a nod.

“Gongyi-shixiong,” Luo Binghe says, and he steps out of his way.

Gongyi Xiao leaves. Luo Binghe walks deeper into the room, sitting down with the Old Palace Master.

“I didn’t realize I was so early,” he says apologetically. “I didn’t intend to interrupt your meeting with Gongyi-shixiong.”

“Ah, nonsense,” the Old Palace Master says, dismissively waving away the issue of Gongyi Xiao. “It’s nothing that can’t wait. Have some tea.”

“Thank you, Shizun,” Luo Binghe says, and for a while everything continues in an entirely unremarkable way. They speak of the things they usually do, going over Luo Binghe’s recent missions and any problems he’s personally handled, the Old Palace Master indulgently praising him for this and that.

Then, rather abruptly, the Old Palace Master deliberately sets his porcelain tea bowl down and says, “I sent Cang Qiong Mountain Sect word of your survival.”

Luo Binghe goes still.

The Old Palace Master takes this as a sign for him to continue.

“I know that you didn’t want to bother them with your presence, Binghe,” he says. “But I decided that it would be for the best to go ahead and inform them despite this. You mustn’t be upset; I levied no accusations against them. I only wrote them a polite letter letting them know that the disciple that they had ‘mistaken’ for dead is still alive, and that Huan Hua Palace would of course be happy to take care of their disciples for them if they can’t handle it themselves.”

He had sent them a *thinly veiled* accusation and insult, in other words. Luo Binghe’s continued existence is an accusation all on its own. That’s why he’d asked the Old Palace Master not to tell them, why he’d *begged* him--

Luo Binghe centers himself. It doesn’t matter now. He has to focus on what he *can* fix.

“When did you send this letter?” he asks. Maybe he can still intercept--

“Weeks ago,” the Old Palace Master says. “I received their response this morning.”

Luo Binghe sets his own tea bowl down.

“I see,” he says. “What did he say?”

Damage control. He’ll have to do damage control. Shen Qingqiu will have accused him of being a demon. Luo Binghe isn’t in as comfortable of a position as he’d like, but he’s still made progress. People respect him, he’s a known face. Then there are the nastier rumors about his old *shizun* that he’s been indirectly encouraging to break down his credibility…

The Old Palace Master's wrinkled face takes on an unhappy, regretful cast, like a man tasked with imparting some unfortunate news.

"Perhaps it would be best for you to read their words yourself, my boy," he says gently. He reaches inside his robes and draws out a letter, passing it over the tea table to Luo Binghe. He has to stop himself from snatching it up like it's something he needs to steal. Instead, he picks it up slowly, measuredly. He folds it open.

He recognizes Shen Qingqiu's hand instantly. It's in the sharp, deliberate elegance of the characters. Mercilessly perfect. He had stared at that beautiful handwriting for hours, trying so very hard to make his childish, wobbly script match it.

The message within is short and simple.

Take that creature into your sect and let him poison it from within if you like. He's your problem now. Don't say I didn't warn you.

That's all. Nothing else. Nothing about Luo Binghe being a demon, no accusations for him to defend himself against. Just that. *He's your problem now.*

Like he's still so unworthy of his shizun's notice that he isn't even worth the effort of an accusation. As if, after having spent five long years crawling his way out of the Abyss, he is still only a sniveling child beneath his contempt.

"I'm terribly sorry, Binghe," the Old Palace Master says. "It is a shame to see your old master speak of you so unfairly. I only hope that this shows you that you don't need to worry over what Cang--"

There's a tearing noise, and Luo Binghe realizes that he's gripped the letter hard enough to rip it along one edge. He gulps down a breath, and realizes that his demonic qi is *boiling* underneath the tight hold he has on it. He holds it down tighter, deeper.

"Excuse me," Luo Binghe says, and he leaves without waiting for anything more. It's all he can do to stop himself from *roaring* at the Old Palace Master, to not react as if this jagged pain in his chest is an attack that has been inflicted upon him.

He charges through the halls on a blind instinct, not thinking as he avoids other people with his senses, the inside of his mind simultaneously loud and blank. It is as if he lurches out of the tea room, blinks, and then he's in the interior garden he'd once found in this section of the palace. The roof opens up to the sky, clear and blue. Plants grow lush and large, covering the walls near completely, turning the room into something crowded and close and teeming with life. If you didn't know any better, you could almost be fooled into thinking that you're out in the open, not still nestled deep within the palace.

Most importantly of all, there are no other people present. He is alone. No one is around to see the way he *snarls,* more like an animal than a person. To see the way he tears the letter to pieces like he wishes it were the man who wrote it. The way he turns to the still and peaceful koi pond and throws a raw and savage spiritual blast into it that sends water bursting twenty feet high into the sky. He wants to knock down the trees, to pull up every plant by the roots

and burn them, shred them, salt the earth. The urge to *destroy* boils in his blood, aches in his teeth, burns his eyes.

If this were the Abyss, he would have no end of creatures to slaughter. If this were the Demon Realm, he would kill whoever dared face him in this state and deal with the fallout after. But he is in the Human Realm, in Huan Hua Palace. He must control himself.

He's your problem now.

Luo Binghe wants to *howl,* and instead he grits his teeth so hard that his molars crack. How *dare* he? How dare he cast Luo Binghe down into hell, into torment and suffering for five long years, to make his life hell *before* that, to leave him to stew in hatred and resentment, to use the dream of revenge as his only fuel to survive - only to *dismiss him?*

Three short lines. Nothing of the truth. No moves made against Luo Binghe, to defend himself. Only a disdainful dismissal, like he's something unpleasant and inconvenient that a foolish neighbor has taken off his hands for him. Like he isn't worth the effort of anything more. Like even after everything, despite all the things he's done, he's still and always will be just as weak as the day Shen Qingqiu poured a cup of tea over his head.

It burns more than anything else he possibly could have written. How can that man keep *getting to him* like this, despite how much Luo Binghe has hardened his heart? He isn't soft and naive any longer, he *isn't.* Any pathetic hopes he may have once had were snuffed out in the Abyss. He's strong now, he's *vicious.* People don't hurt him anymore. He hurts them.

It's not supposed to be like this any longer. He--

Luo Binghe swivels around with a drawn Xin Mo, his teeth bared. Gongyi Xiao goes still.

"Pardon me," Gongyi Xiao says after a moment, his voice level and steady. His eyes are on Luo Binghe's sword, his own hands held at his sides in a way that shows off how empty they are. "I didn't mean to startle you, Luo-shidi."

"What are you doing here?" Luo Binghe demands, too rough and too raw. His heart is hammering inside his chest, blood rushing in his ears.

"I… happened to see you come in here," Gongyi Xiao says. "I was curious."

Luo Binghe realizes that his chest is rising and falling far too visibly, too quickly. He realizes that his hands are *shaking.*

Shen Qingqiu was never supposed to be able to make him tremble again, and yet he did it from half a country away with three lines. Luo Binghe hates him. He hates him, he hates him, he *hates him--*

"Mind your own business," Luo Binghe says, artless and obvious. It's the only thing he can think to say.

"Of course, Luo-shidi," Gongyi Xiao says, his gaze flicking behind Luo Binghe.

Luo Binghe, his nerves wire taut, looks behind him as if he's seriously expecting a sneak attack. He only sees the koi pond - with red blood blooming at the surface. Half of the fish are dead.

He couldn't more obviously be the perpetrator.

Fuck. Fuck, *goddamnit.* He's being so sloppy, uncontrolled and childish. Gongyi Xiao must know that Luo Binghe is steadily being favored more than him by now, must be eager for any chance to rebalance the scales. He has *one moment* of weakness, and so of course someone must come along to take advantage of it. That's how it works. That's how it always works.

"... I can have that cleaned up," Gongyi Xiao says quietly. "No one needs to know."

"Is that so?" Luo Binghe asks, untrusting.

He hasn't even lowered his sword yet. He should, but he can't quite make himself go through with it.

"A gardener comes in to look after this place every evening. So long as you leave a little before then I should have the time to take care of it," he goes on. His voice is soft and gentle, like he's trying to soothe a bristling animal.

Luo Binghe has no reason to trust this apparent generosity. He has no reason to trust *Gongyi Xiao.* Trembling and shaken and furious, he wants nothing more than to beat him into the ground to show him that he is *not* to be trifled with. That he is not weak, is not *hurt.*

That is not part of the plan. Taking a deep breath, Luo Binghe wrenches his self control back in place. He lowers Xin Mo.

Something in Gongyi Xiao's shoulders loosens ever so slightly.

"... You're very much admired across the sect," he says after a moment of silence. "Even though you've only been here for a short while."

Luo Binghe remains silent. Waiting to see where Gongyi Xiao is going with this; what accusation or implication he is going to throw at his feet.

"You're powerful, talented, and charismatic," Gongyi Xiao goes on, something almost a little awkward at the edges of his voice, but he still looks dignified and determined. "Everyone here can see it, just how special you are. You're driven. You're intelligent. You work hard. What isn't there to respect about that? If there are--" His eyes flick to the ground, for just a moment, "--people who *don't* respect that, who refuse to see your accomplishments… Well, then they're in the minority for a reason, aren't they? If everyone agrees on a fact, but a single person disagrees, then isn't the natural conclusion to draw that the single person is only being stubborn and deliberately blind?"

Luo Binghe looks down and sees torn fragments of the letter. Gongyi Xiao had glanced at them, but there's no way for him to have read them, not in the state they're in. He can't have--

Oh, Luo Binghe realizes all at once. *He eavesdropped on my conversation with the Old Palace Master.*

That's how he found Luo Binghe here. It wasn't a coincidence, he'd *followed* him. He overheard what was said, and then followed Luo Binghe here to… what? What is this?

"You don't need to value the words of people who don't deserve it," Gongyi Xiao says, looking directly into Luo Binghe's eyes as if he wants to nail the sentence into his mind. And then he looks away. "... That is all I wanted to say. Excuse me if I've overstepped. I won't continue to bother you with my lecturing."

He turns away to leave, as if that was seriously all he wanted to say, all he wanted to do. Like he came here to-- to attempt to *comfort* Luo Binghe, and nothing more.

There had been a cautious distance between them, or the illusion of one. Luo Binghe can move far faster than people always assume. He crosses it before he knows what he's doing, has his hand on Gongyi Xiao's elbow, is pulling him around. Gongyi Xiao's eyes are wide and surprised, just a hint of fear at the edges - before it quickly gets hidden, tucked away.

It's *maddening* how he keeps doing that. The amount of open sincerity he has seen from Gongyi Xiao since he arrived here could fill a *thimble.* They have all been brief, snatched moments, either startled out of him or quickly pulled away the second he realizes that he's let his mask down.

Until now. This time it was deliberate.

Why?

"What do you *want?"* Luo Binghe demands, because there must be something, because he doesn't *understand* this man, and the longer this goes on the more it *grates* at him.

"I don't know what you mean," Gongyi Xiao says, his walls back up and as thick and high as a mountain. He pulls out of Luo Binghe's grasp, and Luo Binghe *could* clutch at him, he *could* not allow him to go - but he doesn't. This is too much. He's let Gongyi Xiao see and hear far too much, things that *no one* should see or hear. He needs to *stop.*

Luo Binghe does not want to stop. He wants to grab Gongyi Xiao and pry the truth out of him like a physical thing he can wrap his fingers around. He wants to *understand.*

"I've been rude," Gongyi Xiao says, unwilling to let him. "Forgive me, Luo-shidi. I'll leave you now."

His departure almost - but not quite - resembles fleeing.

Bad Dreams

Chapter Summary

One thing has become increasingly clear to Luo Binghe: Gongyi Xiao's behavior doesn't make any sense.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 3.2k words long.

One thing has become increasingly clear to Luo Binghe: Gongyi Xiao's behavior doesn't make any sense.

For all these years, he has been the Golden Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace Sect. Treasured and beloved, their pride and joy. As talented as he is handsome as he is kind, he's been shown off and preened over like their finest jewel. And now - now Luo Binghe is here, and he's ruining it all. Even if Gongyi Xiao doesn't know just how responsible Luo Binghe has been for his recent descent in favor and fortune, that doesn't mean that he could possibly be blind to Luo Binghe's own rise.

The Old Palace Master dismisses his own Head Disciple as unimportant to have tea with him. Young disciples beg him for his attention and guidance first. People who had once fawned over Gongyi Xiao now eat out of Luo Binghe's palm. The Little Palace Mistress looks at him like he's someone worthy of her attention, if not her affection, where before she had only eyes for Gongyi Xiao.

He should feel threatened. He should feel resentful. He should, at the very least, *dislike* Luo Binghe.

Instead, he continues to act with nothing but courteous respect. Luo Binghe challenges him to three more sparring matches, and viciously defeats him each time. Gongyi Xiao only praises his skills and vigor, thanking him for the training opportunity. A visitor mistakes Luo Binghe for the Head Disciple, and Gongyi Xiao does not correct them. Once the mistake is cleared up, Gongyi Xiao only waves it off before introducing Luo Binghe properly, making sure to bring up his accomplishments and talents like a proud mother trying to marry off her son.

His attitude is so persistently respectful and amiable that it borders on *deferential.* Increasingly, it digs its way underneath Luo Binghe's skin and *itches* there. It's convenient,

it's helpful, it's making everything so much easier for him - and yet for all that, it *doesn't make any damned sense.*

Luo Binghe doesn't trust things that don't make sense. You can't control or predict something if you don't *understand* it.

And so, he needs to understand Gongyi Xiao.

And so Luo Binghe Dreams.

"Meng Mo," Luo Binghe growls in frustration, giving a mental tug as he speaks the name. There's a moment - as if the incorporeal bastard could possibly have somewhere *else* to be - and then a familiar presence seeps into his skull. Even though he is already in the Dream Realm, Meng Mo does not materialize. Probably because it would make the small patch of safe ground that Luo Binghe is standing on feel awfully crowded.

"What are you doing, lurking at the outskirts like this?" Meng Mo demands.

Luo Binghe is forced to jump to another sleeping mind, unless he wants to sink into the one he's already standing on.

"It's not by choice," Luo Binghe snaps, in a foul mood after hours of failed searching. "I can't find the mind I'm looking for."

"Oh, really?" There's a flare of idle curiosity inside of Luo Binghe's mind, secondhand. "Since when do you struggle with such things?"

There's a reaching sensation as Meng Mo goes for his memories. Luo Binghe moves to pull back the things he'd rather keep private on automatic reflex, falters as he tries to think of *all* the things he doesn't want to be seen, and ends up blocking Meng Mo entirely. The Dream Demon flinches back from the equivalent of a sudden brick wall, or an open case being snapped shut against his hand.

It's much more *obvious* than just removing a few memories would be.

"Well," Meng Mo says, ruffled like an offended chicken - but it's quickly smoothed over by a sly curiosity, a predator scenting intriguing weakness. "That's interesting. What do you need to hide so badly from me, boy?"

Luo Binghe thinks about the letter, shaking hands. *You don't need to value the words of people who don't deserve it.*

"That's no business of yours," he says curtly. Then, forcibly pulling things back on track, "I want to visit the Head Disciple's mind. Gongyi Xiao. I've been looking for him, and I should have found him by now, but…"

"But he remains out of your grasp," Meng Mo finishes for him.

Luo Binghe does not confirm, because he doesn't need to - and also because it galls him, somehow, that Gongyi Xiao manages to remain obscure and out of reach from him even in the Dream Realm. It's profoundly annoying, and yet also somehow not surprising. Of *course* Gongyi Xiao would find a way to be so utterly frustrating even in his sleep. How incredibly typical of him.

"What sort of protections could do something like this?" Luo Binghe demands. He feels his heel start to sink into the dream he's standing on, and he jumps over to the next sleeping mind.

"You mean, what sort of protections could do this even while *you're* the one doing the looking?" Meng Mo asks. "Hmm. Let me see a memory of him. A recent one."

Feeling oddly reluctant, Luo Binghe clenches his jaw and selects a memory that doesn't make him want to grind his teeth to share. His latest spar with Gongyi Xiao, which had ended with him pinning the man to the ground. Meng Mo hums and tangibly lingers on the memory, inspecting it from every angle, dwelling on it. The more he does so, the more Luo Binghe wants to bristle for some reason.

Then, there's a little pang of realization followed by a creeping curl of condescending amusement. Luo Binghe *does* bristle then.

"What," he bites out.

"Ah, my dear student," Meng Mo sighs. "You've risen so far that you've surpassed even your master. There is no mind you can't invade, no barrier you can't penetrate. The most complex and impossible of dream puzzles are no match for you. And yet, you have fallen for the most ancient blunder there is for any skilled master…"

"Spit it out," Luo Binghe says, a menacing *or else* lurking beneath the words.

"You've overlooked the very basics," Meng Mo says. "Is this boy of yours even *asleep?"*

Luo Binghe - pauses.

"It's the middle of the night," he says, but even as he says it--

"He looked awfully *tired* in that memory of yours, didn't he?" Meng Mo asks knowingly. "Like he hasn't been sleeping very well or consistently?"

Luo Binghe closes his eyes and takes a deep breath through his nose, letting it out slowly through his mouth. Realizing that the error might very well be *that* simple and *that stupid*--

Meng Mo starts hooting in delight as he feels Luo Binghe's outrage course through him.

"Ah, my boy! Don't worry, it happens to all of us! Now, now, don't fret. I bet you anything he's lying in his bed somewhere, tossing and turning, wracked with insomnia. He'll be close enough to the edge of the Dream Realm that I'll be able to find him if I look in the right place. Let me go and yank him the rest of the way down for you."

"Fine," Luo Binghe grits out. If Meng Mo and his utterly frustrating amusement stick around for any longer then Luo Binghe won't be held liable for his actions - and he is *very impatient* by now.

Meng Mo wisely holds his tongue on any last parting words, and slips away. Luo Binghe jumps to the next sleeping mind. He goes back to what he'd been doing before, jumping from mind to mind, searching for the one that feels the right way, feels familiar. Like obscure, dark eyes and polite, false smiles and *bafflement* and *frustration*--

There.

Luo Binghe darts for it instantly, feeling a new mind sink into the Dream Realm, Meng Mo curled around it like a coaxing anchor. Unwilling to wait any longer, Luo Binghe jumps onto it and bats the Dream Demon away impatiently.

"Ungrateful!" Meng Mo huffs, before departing. Luo Binghe ignores him, and instead dives into Gongyi Xiao's dream immediately.

It's not much of a dream. It's dark and silent and heavy, like being trapped at the bottom of a dark lake, except you can still breathe. It muffles both light and sound and thought and time and space. It's empty and full of nothing at the same time.

But that's not too surprising. Gongyi Xiao has hardly been given a moment for any dreams to unfurl, and many people's dreams are sometimes like this. Blank, dark dreams where nothing but rest happens. *The boring ones,* Meng Mo always calls them.

Luo Binghe, hidden in the darkness, decides to give it a little more substance to work with. A moment's consideration - and then the Goldfish Pond is sprawling out around him, taking over the void, spreading like a tapestry being unrolled. He waits to see whether or not it will be instantly shaken off or not, holding his breath - but it holds, settles.

Dreams are always a little hazy and vague in the finer details, but this is scenery that Luo Binghe has handcrafted himself. Every little leaf and strand of grass is crisp and accurate, a perfect mimicry of the real thing.

And sitting on one of the benches that's almost entirely sheltered by all the yellow and orange and golden plantlife around it, sits Gongyi Xiao. As Luo Binghe watches, the man looks around himself idly, before reaching forward and pulling one of the flowers closer towards him. He doesn't pluck it, only gently tugs it until it's close enough for him to lean down and smell it.

Luo Binghe immediately moves to provide the sweet, floral scent, and Gongyi Xiao gives a little hum of approval. On a whim, Luo Binghe makes a fat bumblebee fly by, and is rewarded with a brief, subtle flicker of a smile from Gongyi Xiao.

It can't hurt to soothe him relaxed and off his guard. That's all.

Luo Binghe remains in the background, watching. He's only given Gongyi Xiao a setting, a gentle push towards proper dreaming. His sleeping mind should do something with it soon.

Some nonsense narrative, waking anxiety or desire or something else manifesting itself. He waits, and he watches.

But nothing much continues to happen. An incense stick of time later, Gongyi Xiao still sits and seems to just soak in the golden peace of a quiet, sunny afternoon in the garden. No faceless disciple comes running in to cry out about a crisis that needs the Head Disciple's personal involvement, no monster comes crawling out of the pond, and the flowers don't start to whisper and talk to him.

Fine. If Gongyi Xiao's sleeping mind isn't going to provide anything, then Luo Binghe will just have to give it a nudge himself.

Still hidden and watching, Luo Binghe makes a reflection of himself enter the garden. Golden robes in order, dark hair curling, the smile he's cultivated to display confidence firmly in place.

Gongyi Xiao notices the reflection immediately, and the finer details of the Goldfish Pond fuzz out at the edges as the reflection instantly becomes the focus of the dream. Luo Binghe allows it, letting go of his hold on the scenery, the reflection, the dream. He wants to see what Gongyi Xiao's mind comes up with on its own, with only this level of prompting. Like letting a wheel roll down a hill, seeing which angle it tilts towards by itself.

What do you truly *think of me, Gongyi Xiao?*

"Gongyi-shixiong," the reflection greets, a slightly mocking twinge to the title - but he isn't looking at Gongyi Xiao. Not the one that's watching from the bench.

"Luo-shidi," another Gongyi Xiao says, not suddenly appearing but being already present, in the typical way of dreams.

Luo Binghe's reflection stalks towards the other Gongyi Xiao until he's standing in front of him - and all the people around him. The people who were there before, but also have only now sprung into existence. Luo Binghe recognizes faces. Xie Ruonlan, Qin Wanrong, Tang Enlai, Shao Wenling… Some of the faces are clearer, others more vague suggestions than anything else. The two clearest faces are the ones standing directly by Gongyi Xiao's sides: the Little Palace Mistress and the Old Palace Master.

Standing across from each other like this, it's impossible not to notice how the light shines differently on the two of them. Gongyi Xiao looks pale and washed out; Luo Binghe, on the other hand, is impossibly haloed by the sunlight, as if it shines only for him.

"I'm here now," Luo Binghe's reflection says, still smiling - but his eyes are hard and dark.

Xie Ruonlan crosses the distance, moving so that she's standing behind Luo Binghe's reflection instead of Gongyi Xiao. Pan Huan and her other friend flock around her, following.

"I know," the other Gongyi Xiao says.

Tang Enlai moves away, crossing over to Luo Binghe's side.

"Your time is over," Luo Binghe's reflection says.

Qin Wanrong goes hand in hand with her sister, Qin Wanyue appearing like it ought to be taken for granted that she should be walking along with her twin.

"Now that I'm here, there's no more point to you."

Cai Yun goes as well, joining the growing crowd behind Luo Binghe. Dreamlike, it's already larger than it should be.

"So really, there's no reason for you to stay."

Shao Wenling goes to him.

"You never really deserved this position, this place."

Han Xiaodan goes.

"It's mine now. All of it."

The Old Palace Master glides elegantly over towards Luo Binghe with a warm, fond smile, taking pride of place by his right shoulder.

"And there's just none left over for you."

The Little Palace Mistress lets go of Gongyi Xiao's arm. She *runs* towards Luo Binghe, and she doesn't look back.

And just like that, Gongyi Xiao is all alone. He looks more diminished than ever, the gold of his robes looking dull and faded. Luo Binghe stands tall and proud before him, a crowd of admirers behind him.

"So I think it would be for the best if you just left."

Luo Binghe reaches out, grabbing the golden medallion hanging around Gongyi Xiao's neck. With one firm *tug,* the chain snaps, and Luo Binghe clutches the stolen possession to his own chest. He smiles with a cold triumph.

"Somewhere far away," he says. "Some quiet, lonely little outpost where no one will ever see or hear from you again. You're not relevant any longer, so it doesn't matter where you're put - so long as you're gone."

No one even looks at Gongyi Xiao. They only have eyes for Luo Binghe, the proud and arrogant center of attention. Except, of course, that isn't Luo Binghe. It's just a dream construct, a hollow copy. And that isn't Gongyi Xiao either; the real Gongyi Xiao is sitting on a bench, watching the scene before them like he's an audience member to his own life.

Luo Binghe tears his eyes away from the dream, returning his attention to the real Gongyi Xiao. The man is watching an intruder take everything he has. All the attention, respect, status, the Old Palace Master's regard, and the Little Palace Mistress' adoration. His entire life is being stolen before his eyes. His home.

And so, Luo Binghe expects to find anxiety. Resentment, jealousy, fear, *hatred* - any of it would be warranted. Reasonable. *Here it is,* he thinks. Here's the ugly truth lurking underneath the facade that Luo Binghe's been looking for.

Except he doesn't find it. Gongyi Xiao looks… He looks like he's seeing something he's been waiting for. Not a *nice* something, not a *good* something, but still something inevitable and unavoidable. There's almost a strange sort of… relief? In his expression. But not a true relief. An unpleasant eventuality has finally come to pass, and he can stop dreading it now. It's the same sort of exhausted calm that Luo Binghe has seen in prey animals who realize that they won't be getting away, and so they give up on struggling.

That's… baffling.

Luo Binghe moves out of the shadows of the dream, entering it properly. He sits down on the bench next to Gongyi Xiao, who turns to look at him. He seems only mildly puzzled by the sudden appearance of a second Luo Binghe.

"Hello," Gongyi Xiao says, bemused.

Luo Binghe gestures towards the scene still playing out in front of them. His reflection is now walking away from the other Gongyi Xiao, taking all of the people - and the warmth and the sunlight - along with him, leaving the former Head Disciple to a bleak and barren patch on the ground.

"Why aren't you stopping him?" he asks.

Gongyi Xiao gives him a look like he's just asked a nonsensical question.

"That's not what I'm supposed to do," he says.

"What do you mean by that?" Luo Binghe demands.

"It's just not," Gongyi Xiao says. He looks back towards the scene - towards the Gongyi Xiao who has been abandoned, discarded, replaced. He's looking at the people who have left him, at Luo Binghe. He doesn't move to follow them, staying where he's been left. "This is how it was always going to end for me."

There is so much certainty in his voice, like he's just stating a simple fact. Like there was never any doubt.

"You don't know that," Luo Binghe says, even though he's seeing his own plans spin out before him. He hasn't decided yet what to do with Gongyi Xiao once he's been toppled, but he's vaguely known in the back of his mind that he'll have to do *something* with him once he reaches that point. It wouldn't do to have a resentful former rival lingering around the palace,

bitterly stirring up trouble and looking for opportunities to get back at the intruder who stole everything from him. It's just common sense.

Exiling him to some far away outpost to never come back sounds like a very convenient solution. Luo Binghe might very well choose that, once the day comes. It works well.

He doesn't know how to feel, seeing that Gongyi Xiao has predicted his fate so accurately.

"I do," Gongyi Xiao says simply.

The other Gongyi Xiao is fading away, like mist dissipating under the sun. Like he's so irrelevant that he might as well not exist. Luo Binghe's reflection is surrounded by richness and splendor and worship, vivid and resplendent.

"You're not going to do anything?" Luo Binghe asks, unable to stop himself. "You're not even going to try? How could you just allow something like this to happen to you? How could you *let me* do this to you?"

Gongyi Xiao smiles, and--

--and it's the *exact* same damned false smile he wears in waking life--

--and he says, "There are worse fates than being thrown away. I should be grateful."

This is too much. It makes a wave of anger *surge* through Luo Binghe, and it's so unexpected that it takes him entirely by surprise. His control slips. With a *crack* the entire dream starts to splinter, pieces slanting drunkenly to the sides. Everything starts to fragment and slip away, falling apart, and Luo Binghe swears and moves to leave.

He almost, *almost* doesn't see it before he goes.

But he does.

The other Luo Binghe, the dream construct, his reflection.

As the dream collapses in on itself, tearing into pieces, he sees it: a demon mark glowing proud and red upon his forehead.

Temper Tantrum

Chapter Summary

> “Cai-shidi,” Luo Binghe says. “What’s wrong? Is someone hurt?”
>
> “Um-- maybe?” Cai Yun has to gasp for air, making the words leave him in stop and start motions. “It’s the-- the Little Palace Mistress.”
>
> “Ah,” Luo Binghe says, understanding.

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is 8k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe’s human disguise is flawless. He *knows* it is. He had made sure to test it ruthlessly before enacting his plan, subjecting himself to every demon detection talisman or spell that he could get his hands on. Cang Qiong Mountain Sect itself let him walk through their gates and live there for five years, and not a single one of their wards ever noticed him.

Even after his seal broke, once he’d managed to wrench his demon side under control he’s been able to slip back into the guise of a human almost without effort. There are very, very, *very* few objects or creatures that could possibly sense that there's something wrong with him, and the overwhelming majority of them are demonic. *Not* something a righteous cultivation sect would deign to own, in other words.

There is absolutely no way for Gongyi Xiao to know that he’s a half demon.

And yet.

“Dreams are slippery things,” Meng Mo says in his head.

He no longer clutches as close to Luo Binghe as he had when he’d been a weak and frail parasite fully unable to sustain himself without the shelter of Luo Binghe’s mind and qi, and Luo Binghe no longer clutches him as close as he had when he’d been trapped in the Eternal Abyss without a single sentient creatures for miles and miles to keep him even vaguely sane. Most of the time nowadays Meng Mo is somewhere either spying for Luo Binghe, tormenting his enemies with nightmares, or amusing himself however it is that he does so. He

comes to give regular reports, or when Luo Binghe calls, or just whenever he's particularly bored.

As soon as Luo Binghe had been snapped awake by Gongyi Xiao's dream breaking he had instantly dived back into the Dream Realm, searching frantically for his sleeping mind. When he hadn't found it, he had pulled Meng Mo to his side and demanded that he coax Gongyi Xiao back into sleep immediately. Meng Mo had tried, and then informed Luo Binghe that Gongyi Xiao's mind now rested far too lightly upon the surface of the Dream Realm to be pulled back under again. His sleep was so fitful and restless that it hardly counted as true sleep at all, and Meng Mo could no longer affect waking minds since his physical body was destroyed.

Luo Binghe had made him try again anyway. And again, and again, and again. But it was the same result every time, and now Luo Binghe is back in the waking world and pacing the inside of his quarters like an agitated tiger trapped in a too small cage.

"Just because you see something doesn't mean that it's *literal,"* Meng Mo goes on in lecturing tones. "You said it yourself. How could he know that you're a demon? There's no way. Perhaps he's just said to himself *ah, that damned Luo Binghe, he's as wicked as a demon!* And so that's how he sees you in his dreams. It doesn't necessarily mean that he *really* thinks you're a demon."

"But what if it does?" Luo Binghe demands. "Sometimes things are exactly as they appear. He could see me as a demon because he *knows me to be a demon.* It's too much of a coincidence. The demon mark glowed *red."*

Meng Mo hums, and Luo Binghe can feel him tracing the memory of that one half-glimpse inside of his mind yet again. Turning it this way and that, examining it as a jeweler might a dubious sapphire.

"But the shape of it isn't correct," Meng Mo points out. "It's hazy, shifting. It's the way people imagine the faces of people they've only heard vaguely described before, without ever actually seeing them with their own eyes."

"Maybe it's not something he knows, then, but something he seriously *suspects,"* Luo Binghe says.

"When would you have given him cause to suspect such a thing? You're normally a lot more careful than that," Meng Mo points out. "Have there been any opportunities for him to discover you? Think back."

"On the mission that I sabotaged him?" Luo Binghe hazards. "I had to release my demonic qi to be able to use Xin Mo to tear an opening into the Abyss. If he'd gotten a glimpse of me then… but he *didn't.* I would have noticed him!"

Luo Binghe had spent five long years honing his senses, ready to react to the slightest indication that some creature might be sneaking up on him with instant and overwhelming retaliation. His survival had depended on it. He is, at all times, keenly aware of every single person in his presence. Their placement, their movements, the exact distance between them

and precisely how long it might take him or them to cross it. He *would have noticed* if Gongyi Xiao had followed him into the woods. Hell, Luo Binghe had *personally* pushed him into true sleep beforehand, assuring himself of his own privacy.

“If there’s no way for him to know, then he doesn’t know,” Meng Mo declares. “It was a metaphor, nothing more.”

“You don’t *know* that,” Luo Binghe growls, with a wild swipe of his claws through the air as he swings around to pace the next length of his quarters.

His teeth are sharp, his demon mark aglow, exposing him for what he is as he seethes restlessly. It’s foolish to make himself so vulnerable even within the privacy of his own locked rooms, but he thinks if he tries to restrain himself in such a way right now then he’s going to end up breaking most of the furniture instead - which would be inconvenient at best to cover up.

Gongyi Xiao’s dream, and all the questions it’s given rise to, drive him to distraction. He’s furious and baffled and he wants nothing more than to pick up Xin Mo to go and *force* answers out of the man. All along, there has been the vague conviction that Gongyi Xiao has not been fooled by Luo Binghe’s act, that he has not been charmed or tricked like everyone else. The only reason Luo Binghe hasn’t done something about it is that he had *no* evidence for this lingering suspicion in the back of his mind. Gongyi Xiao’s behavior does not support it. What sort of righteous cultivator, what sort of honored Head Disciple, would treat an invading demon in the way that he has? So courteously and respectfully, welcoming him into the sect and helping him at every opportunity, never doing or saying anything to disdain or sabotage him. It hardly makes much sense with the two of them as nothing more than fellow human cultivators, one of them steadily being favored over the other. With the knowledge of Luo Binghe secretly being a demon it makes no sense at *all.*

Besides, *when* would Gongyi Xiao have discovered it? He hasn’t sensed any one moment when his attitude towards Luo Binghe significantly shifted. He has been polite and welcoming and *infuriatingly distant* from the very first day, and remains so. When could he have--

Luo Binghe stops in his tracks.

There has been, in fact, one previous occasion that Luo Binghe and Gongyi Xiao found themselves in the same area at the same time. At a time when Luo Binghe had his human disguise ripped away from him all at once, exposing him for anyone to see. A time when he was utterly and completely distracted, fully unaware of his surroundings.

“Gongyi Xiao participated in the Immortal Alliance Conference.” Ridiculously, as if it is at all relevant, he adds: “He came in second.”

Meng Mo catches his meaning immediately.

“Could he have seen you then? Stumbled onto the edge of the scene of the crime just in time to get a front row seat?”

Luo Binghe pictures it. A wounded, exhausted, younger Gongyi Xiao stumbling through the arena, half hidden behind the trees, halting in stunned confusion as he takes in the sight of a demon dressed in the white uniform supplied to all the participating disciples. Watching from a distance as Shen Qingqiu closed in on him and--

“But then why wouldn’t he have talked about what he’d seen?” Meng Mo goes on. “A Cang Qiong disciple turning out to be a demon in disguise - now that’s *news.* He’s from Huan Hua, so he’s got no reason not to speak up about it. Only Cang Qiong would lose face.”

“He could have assumed that Shen Qingqiu would share the news himself,” Luo Binghe says slowly. “And then once he didn’t, he… Gongyi Xiao wouldn’t have any evidence, it would be his word against that of a Peak Lord. He wouldn’t have had any great motivation to pursue the matter. It would have been easier just to let it lie.”

“Not contradicting his elder, eh? How filial. But if he *had* seen you, wouldn’t the demon mark be more accurate? He would have actually *seen it,* then.”

“Five years ago,” Luo Binghe argues. “Perhaps only briefly, at a distance, in the midst of a chaotic battlefield. He would have been disoriented, confused. It would only make sense for him to not remember it perfectly.”

“You’re arguing for this hard, boy,” Meng Mo remarks. “You’d almost think that you *want* him to know about you.”

“My entire plan hinges on a slow, measured take over of a powerful, established cultivation sect. If Gongyi Xiao knows, then that risks everything. I can’t just shrug my shoulders and guess that it’s *probably fine.* I have to *know.”*

Meng Mo hums, a wordless feeling inside Luo Binghe’s mind like he’s conceding the point, or at least accepting that he won’t be convincing him to let go of this. His touch dips into Luo Binghe’s memories - not the recent ones. Further back. The memory Meng Mo is searching for floats up to the surface of his thoughts as soon as it’s touched.

Gongyi Xiao, dropping an armful of scrolls as soon as he lays eyes on Luo Binghe. The very first time they met. Meng Mo trails over the memory minutely, studying it, lingering on Gongyi Xiao’s face. How his eyes widened, his face going a shade paler. When it actually happened, it had only been for a handful of seconds. He had regained his composure quickly, smoothing out his expression into something more measured. Luo Binghe had taken it for an overreaction to his injuries, nothing more.

Now, however…

“Is that shock,” Meng Mo asks, “or *recognition?”*

“I don’t know,” Luo Binghe says. *But I intend to find out.*

“Luo-shixiong! Luo-shixiong!”

Luo Binghe stops in his tracks, in the middle of a bridge crossing the trickling river between the Crystal Garden and Butterfly Nursery, and turns to see a teenaged disciple sprinting in his direction. It's Cai Yun, and he catches himself on the railing of the bridge as he closes the distance, looking winded and urgent.

"Cai-shidi," Luo Binghe says. "What's wrong? Is someone hurt?"

"Um-- maybe?" Cai Yun has to gasp for air, making the words leave him in stop and start motions. "It's the-- the Little Palace Mistress."

"Ah," Luo Binghe says, understanding.

He's been working on steadily taking on as many of Gongyi Xiao's duties as he can within the bounds of plausible deniability, and this is one of them. It's not one of his *official* duties, after all. It would be improper to write down *'wrangling the Sect Leader's violently temperamental daughter'* down in a ledger somewhere. But the fact remains that it *is* something that needs to be done, and that not a lot of people can do it. For a long time, that list included only two people: Gongyi Xiao, and the Old Palace Master himself. The Sect Leader would naturally be too important, busy, and high status to be sent running every time his daughter throws a temper tantrum, however, and so it has essentially been solely Gongyi Xiao's responsibility to take care of for many years now.

Until now. Luo Binghe has been more than happy to volunteer himself for the service. Gongyi Xiao has been so *busy* lately, after all. So overwhelmed, so distracted. It's much better to just send for him instead if something happens. He doesn't mind at all. He's only happy to help.

"Where is she?" he asks.

"The Peach Orchard," Cai Yun wheezes.

"Thank you," Luo Binghe says, and doesn't wait for any more details. He can get those later.

By now, he has fully memorized the sprawling network of gardens contained within the grounds of Huan Hua Palace. They number in the hundreds, but he remembers the name and location of every one, and how they each link up to each other. He takes the most efficient route possible, and reaches his destination in less than five minutes.

It's quite a scene.

The Peach Orchard is as fragrant as it is beautiful, pink flowering trees and near ripe peaches hanging heavy and red and yellow from their branches. There are a few tasteful benches tucked away in discrete locations, to let people rest and appreciate the scenery if they may want to. Luo Binghe knows this garden to be one in which disciples like to come and soak in the peaceful atmosphere, relaxing in the serene silence amongst the peach blossoms.

It's not very serene or peaceful now, however. The Little Palace Mistress has a man who looks a couple years older than her and weighing about twice her body weight cornered against a tree, her barbed whip uncoiled and in her hand. There are several long furrows in

the grass, and Luo Binghe can read the way she must have herded him into place with her whip like an animal - very deftly done, honestly.

"Draw your sword!" the Little Palace Mistress roars.

The man is pressing himself so hard against the tree at his back that he looks like he wishes it would swallow him up. He's pale faced and actively cowering.

"I-- I don't want to fight you, Mistress--"

She snaps her whip, and ends up ripping a branch from the tree he's cowering against. It's not a small branch. He flinches hard, and the crowd gasps and cries out in fear.

Because of course there's a crowd. There's about half a dozen of them standing a healthy distance from the Little Palace Mistress' back, all looking like they very much want to bolt but also feel like they can't just abandon their friend - but not like they can outright intervene either. And so they're trapped as audience members instead.

"That's *too bad,"* the Little Palace Mistress snarls. "Because I *do.* Draw! Your! Sword!"

A snap of her whip across the ground accompanies each of the last three words. The man squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head desperately, hands trembling and held far away from the sword sheathed at his hip. That is, honestly, probably the smartest move for him. It looks like the Little Palace Mistress is holding herself back until he's 'armed', so that what she'll do to him can be considered a 'fight.'

Her patience will only hold for so long, though. It's a short term strategy at best.

"I meant no offense--" the man chokes out.

"Then *don't say offensive things!"* she roars, taking a step closer. She looks furious, absolutely incandescent with rage. "Do you think you can just say whatever you like with no consequences? Do you think I'm *deaf?* If you open your mouth, then you're going to have to be prepared to be slapped in the face for the filth you spew!"

She looks prepared to do far more than just slap his face.

"Palace Mistress!" one of the onlookers cries out, looking faint to be speaking up. She has two friends holding onto her hands; as she speaks one of them lets go and takes a step away from her, as if recoiling from a leper. The other clings onto her tighter, whimpering, "Shijie, *don't."*

The onlooker ignores her friend. "Palace Mistress, please forgive him! You-- you misunderstand him! It was out of context--"

The Little Palace Mistress turns on the interloper with such vicious menace that the entire crowd flinches away from her like a wave, despite being well out of whipping range.

"I misunderstand?" she demands. She gives an ugly, furious laugh. "Do you think I'm *stupid?* How could I have possibly misunderstood? What *context* do you have that makes insulting

Gongyi-shixiong *acceptable?"*

The hapless disciple looks ready to burst into tears. Wait, no. She *is* crying, tears slipping down her face as she trembles.

"We're sorry. We didn't mean--"

Luo Binghe interrupts before the Little Palace Mistress gets the chance to do so, stepping more fully out into view.

"Fu-shimei," he says. "Can we talk privately?"

He instantly becomes the center of attention, every head turned towards him. He can see relief break like dawn across the faces of all the disciples, as if they've been told that the cavalry has finally arrived. They're saved.

The Little Palace Mistress' expression remains thunderous.

"Oh, of course, *Luo-shixiong,"* she replies with poisonous sweetness. "Right after I'm finished *talking privately* with--" She tosses a dismissive wave at the cowering man against the tree. "--my shidi over here. Wait for your turn."

If Gongyi Xiao were here doing this instead, she'd probably already be giving in. Gongyi Xiao would be at her side, petting down her hackles like soothing a bristling cat, and she'd be purring in his lap within a minute, grumbling under her breath about the upstart mice that angered her in the first place.

Luo Binghe has to use a different strategy.

"Ah, I'm sorry for interrupting," he says, and he allows some steel to slip into his voice. He curls his hand around the handle of Xin Mo pointedly. "But I'm afraid the matter is urgent. You'll just have to speak to your shidi later."

The Little Palace Mistress looks at him. She hasn't struck him as the sort of person who's good at catching *hints,* but he's doing the equivalent of hitting her over the head with a blunt object as far as hinting goes. He can see her do the mental calculations, deciding how to respond. Obviously she doesn't want to give Luo Binghe what he *wants,* what he's asking for. But on the other hand… She has a nameless coward against a tree who refuses to draw his sword, and then Luo Binghe who is as good as openly challenging her.

If she's spoiling for a fight, then her choice is obvious. And she is, and so she does.

"If I catch you mouthing off like that again, I'll make you *regret it,"* the Little Palace Mistress snaps at the cowering man. "Leave."

"Y-- yes, Palace Mistress! Thank you!" The man hesitates for only a moment, and then runs away. The Little Palace Mistress spitefully flicks her whip after him to chase at his heels, and he only yelps and runs faster. As soon as he goes, the rest of the disciples follow him, streaming past Luo Binghe in a rush. They thank him under their breath as they pass him, someone reaching out to clap him gratefully on the shoulder.

And then they're alone.

"You have some nerve, interfering with my business," the Little Palace Mistress says, approaching him the way a rival tiger might. Her gaze steady and unwavering on him, moving slowly like she's ready to leap in any direction at the slightest twitch from him.

Luo Binghe takes Xin Mo from his hip.

"Well, you make it necessary when you insist on creating such a *mess,"* Luo Binghe says. "How exactly do you think this is helpful?"

"So you think I should have just kept my tongue while they sat around and insulted Gongyi-shixiong? Stay quiet and not do anything, just like you wanted? Because that's worked *so damned well!"*

Her whip flies out with that last exclamation, her body a fluid line of fury, the weapon moving like an extension of her and her rage. Luo Binghe brings Xin Mo up so that her barbed whip will wrap around *it* instead of *him* - and it does. The Little Palace Mistress barks a humorless, mocking laugh, and then *yanks* at her whip.

It's a perfect disarming move. She's probably used it on many cultivators before, to great effect. It's such a shame for her that Luo Binghe doesn't let it work. Xin Mo is still sheathed, and so all he has to do is twist his wrist a little for the sheath to slide off, freeing his sword and leaving the Little Palace Mistress' whip tangled up around his sheath in a single motion.

"And this *does* work?" Luo Binghe throws back, and he takes the opportunity to charge her. A whip is a good weapon for midrange combat, and practically useless for everything else. He just has to get deep enough into her guard, and then she won't be able to turn it on him without regaining distance first. She'll either have to turn her unprotected back to him or be forced into an awkward, backwards retreat that will give him the advantage, let him harry her--

She leaps *towards* him without a speck of hesitation like she intends to body tackle him to the ground, and he's unprepared enough that he has to throw himself to the side to avoid her.

"Why not?!" she snaps, passing him. His dodge has given her the space to move past him, to maneuver so she can properly aim for him and he has his *back* to her and there's no time to get back up, to stand--

Luo Binghe makes Xin Mo fly without letting go of his grip on the hilt, making his own sword drag him on his knees across the grass. He *feels* her barbed whip snap through the air, can feel the wind blow a few strands of his hair into his face as it narrowly misses him.

"If everyone's too *scared* to say anything, then they'll *shut up,"* she says.

The very moment after she's thrown out her whip is the safest one for him, when he can disregard her weapon for just a second and reorient himself, move. He twists around so that he's facing her again, uses legs and one hand to push himself back up to standing like a tiger pouncing.

“That’s a *child's* way of thinking!” Luo Binghe fires back, leaning into his momentum as he charges her like a bull. He can hear the barbed whip slithering and tearing up the grass behind him as she pulls her arm back, but it won’t reach him in time. She won’t retreat. It was stupid of him to think that, she’s not the *type* who ever retreats, whether she should or shouldn’t. Instead she’s going to--

She throws herself forward again, like she intends to crash into and *through* him. Trying to make him flinch, the way she’s *always* been able to make people flinch.

Luo Binghe lets her crash into him. He braces himself for it, lets go of Xin Mo and wraps his arms around her, makes sure that they *both* go down. She makes a startled, breathless noise, and he grabs her wrist and starts applying pressure before she processes what’s happening.

“Just because *you* can’t hear it doesn’t mean it isn’t still there,” Luo Binghe hisses, wrenching her wrist into an angle that he knows is deeply painful. Trying to make her drop her whip, as useless as it is to her while they’re on top of each other like this. “They’ll just resent him all the more, that they’re not even allowed to talk--”

The Little Palace Mistress makes a raw, animalistic noise of anger and pain, and then she’s raking her sharp, pretty little nails down his face. She’s going for his *eyes.* He has to turn his face away to protect them, and feels her elbow dig into his chest as she uses it to prop herself up, get leverage over him.

“It doesn’t *matter!”* she howls. “I’ll make them all so scared that they’ll never say or do anything at all, because they’ll know that if they’re ever rude to him then I’ll whip them *bloody.* They can be as bitter and jealous as they want, so long as they keep it to themselves!”

Luo Binghe gives up on making her drop the whip - her pain tolerance is ridiculous, fueled by her fury. Using both of his freed hands he grabs her and flips them over, gets her underneath him. She looks up at him with the eyes of a wild, murderous animal at close quarters, her pretty little hair ornaments all knocked loose and slipping away.

“Is that what he’d want?” Luo Binghe asks. “For people to be too scared to talk to or about him?”

The way her face crumples, he can see that she knows what the answer is.

“Shut up,” she hisses, and she drops her whip and punches him. It’s just a blow to the gut, so he doesn’t risk sacrificing his position to try blocking it.

It knocks the wind out of him, all the air in his lungs wheezing out of his mouth.

“He’ll have me,” the Little Palace Mistress insists while he’s too breathless to contradict her. “Everyone else is trash anyway - he doesn’t need them.”

“But,” Luo Binghe gasps, and he grabs for her wrists to prevent any more blows. “But he *wants* them.”

“They don’t *deserve* him!” She writhes underneath him as if she’s trying to buck him off like a rebellious horse, refusing to let him get a good restraining grip on her wrists. Fighting him every step of the way, a spiteful struggle to the last.

“He still wants them.” He leans down over her, caging her in. He has her pinned, is heavier than her, is above her. It’s just a matter of time-- he catches one of her wrists properly, slams it down onto the ground. Once he’s caught one, it’s quick work to catch the other.

The moment she realizes that he has her, that there’s no wiggle room for her to rip herself free and continue to tear into him, she throws her head back and *screams.* Luo Binghe actually flinches, startled, before he realizes that it’s a howl of helpless rage. The sort of agonized, unrestrained scream a child throwing a tantrum would make.

Luo Binghe holds her down through the entire scream, which she makes with all the air she has left in her lungs. He wonders if anyone will come investigating - it sounds like he’s *murdering* her - but no one does.

Too scared of her, most likely.

“Are you done?” he asks. He sounds - winded. He can feel blood on his face from where she scratched at him, and his leg stings at a place where her whip grazed him without him even noticing in the moment. His stomach aches from her punch, which hit with all the force of a sledgehammer. It was a brief scuffle, couldn’t have lasted more than a few minutes, and yet he’s surprised by how-- how *ruffled* he feels.

He’d been holding back, of course. Unable to use or do anything that might reveal his demonic heritage. But *still.*

She glares furiously up at him, and he half expects her to outright bare her teeth at him like she really *is* a demon. She looks like she’s seriously considering inhaling for another scream just because he asked. But she looks winded and ruffled as well, her face flushed with exertion and her hair a disarrayed mess, her chest rising and falling as she pants for air. They’re both covered in dirt and grass stains from rolling around on the ground, and the lawn is just absolutely *ruined.*

“I hate you,” she swears.

Luo Binghe counts that as progress on the seduction, then.

“Fu-shimei can feel however she likes,” Luo Binghe replies with deliberately grating politeness, and lets go of her. He moves so he isn’t pinning her any longer, sitting on the ground at her side instead. “You know, if you want to fight someone, then you can just come find me. I’m always up for a friendly spar.”

He speaks the last two words with a slightly sardonic twist.

“I didn’t want to fight *you,”* she replies mulishly, sitting up. Her hands start patting at her hair, frowning as she assesses the damage. It’s quite thorough. Hair pins are sticking out and dangling like a broken bird’s nest. “I wanted to fight the idiot spouting nonsense.”

“What did he say?” Luo Binghe asks. “About Gongyi-shixiong.”

She scowls as she remembers.

“He said that Gongyi-shixiong’s making so many mistakes that he might as well be working for the demons,” she spits out. “And then they all *laughed.”*

“Ah,” Luo Binghe says.

It very obviously wasn’t a serious accusation, but instead only an idle sort of joke. A light and idle joke that reveals truer sentiments underneath it: a diminishing trust and respect for Gongyi Xiao’s competence, showing how they *truly* see him. Frazzled. Overwhelmed, stressed, out of his depth. Not up to the task of being Head Disciple.

Humor is always the easiest way for people to air their uglier opinions underneath a guise of plausible deniability, using a smile and a wry twist of their voice to imply that of course they’re only exaggerating, they don’t *really* mean it. But they do. They do, and that’s why they’re saying it. If people agree, then they smile and laugh. If they don’t, then they can’t properly confront or argue with it. After all, it was *only a joke.*

But the Little Palace Mistress hadn’t cared. She heard an insult towards Gongyi Xiao, heard the reality of it, and she’d struck. Of course she wouldn’t let the opinions of others stop her, not even for a moment. No matter how much of an insane overreaction it must look like, no matter how irrational and dangerous it makes her appear.

This very likely was only the last straw for her. She’s probably been *feeling* the rest of the sect slowly turning against Gongyi Xiao, but has been left with nothing solid or tangible to point at, to get her teeth into and fight against. That cowering man was only the unlucky fool to say something where she could hear it, giving her the first concrete thing she could finally direct her growing, impotent rage at. She wasn’t attacking him for a single joke; she was attacking him for the entire shifting tide against Gongyi Xiao for these last few months.

“Are you going to fight everyone who says stuff like that, then?” he asks her. “They’ll all hate you.”

She gives him a withering look, as if he’s said something remarkably stupid.

“So what?” she asks. “They already do.”

He blinks.

“What?” she asks him, a humorless smile pulling at one side of her mouth. “You didn’t *notice?”*

“It’s not that,” Luo Binghe says. “I just didn’t think you were that observant.”

The Little Palace Mistress looks at him, then grabs one of the golden hairpins dangling from her hair and stabs it at him point first. He dodges it, and she doesn’t bother to even lean over from where she’s sitting to pursue him. It makes him think of a lazy swipe of the claws from a lounging tiger.

“I’m *not* a complete idiot,” she seethes. She starts viciously plucking the hair pins out one by one, dropping them onto her lap. “I don’t think that someone likes me just because they *smile* at me. They just have to do that because my daddy’s the Sect Leader. If he wasn’t, then no one would even look at me.”

If her father wasn’t the Sect Leader, then maybe she’d be a little more well adjusted in the first place.

“I can see the difference when they talk to *me* and when they talk to Gongyi-shixiong,” she goes on. “It’s different. People talk to him even when they don’t have to, because they want to. They make jokes. They stand close to him. They seek him out. They complain about things, or ask him for help, or share things with him without him telling them to do it.”

And they do none of those things with her, she means.

“But now they’re doing all of those things less,” she mutters, wrenching the final pin out of her hair with a motion that seems like it must tear out some hair along with it. “They’re not really talking *to* him any longer. They’re not scared of him, but it’s--”

She breaks off and makes a noise of frustration, reaching for words that she can’t find, trying to articulate something that she’s felt but can’t explain.

“It’s different from how they talked to him before,” Luo Binghe volunteers for her. “He’s being seen and treated differently.”

An increasing lack of trust or respect for his abilities. He used to be the person you could come to with your troubles, and depend on to help solve them. Now people have seen him fail, repeatedly. Sometimes in big ways, like with the robbery and the disastrous mission, and sometimes in smaller ways. Luo Binghe has been taking every little opportunity he’s been able to find. It’s so easy to sabotage Gongyi Xiao when he’s helpfully taking on more and more of the man’s duties. He can do a poor job and then pass the credit off to the Head Disciple, or go out of his way to do a better job than he ever did and then act as if it was effortless. Making him look careless, clumsy, incompetent. It’s so simple to do.

“They’re treating him *worse,”* she fumes, raking her fingers through her tangled hair to straighten it out. It looks like it hurts, the way she’s doing it. “It’s not supposed to be like this! He-- he’s *Gongyi-shixiong.* Everyone loves him. Everyone knows that he’s *good.* That’s the only thing I’ve ever agreed with the rest of the world about. And now they’re treating him like--”

Like me.

She’s watching people slowly begin to talk to Gongyi Xiao in the exact same way they talk to her. With a polite smile in accordance to his station, with absolutely no true respect behind it. Hollow, performative esteem. She’s used to that sort of treatment, but he isn’t. She isn’t used to *him* being given that sort of treatment.

It’s sweet, really, that it’s distressing her so much. That the idea of her Gongyi Xiao being treated poorly is enough to upset her to this extent. It would almost be touching, if it weren’t

for the fact that her behavior is only making it worse for him. Resentment can't be turned against the Little Palace Mistress, after all. She's fierce, and powerful, and dangerous. You can't challenge her to a fight, can't insult her, can't argue with her. There's nothing for it but to weep and beg for forgiveness, and then you're left with your wounds and all of your bitterness and nowhere to turn it… except for at Gongyi Xiao. He isn't vicious. He isn't vengeful. He's a *safe target.*

The Little Palace Mistress is a sharp and hostile woman, as aggressive as she is violent. It's strange then, that she reminds him so strongly of Ning Yingying. Anyone who knew the two would be bewildered by the comparison, but he can't help but see it. That almost innocent tactlessness, that overwhelming honesty that causes so many problems. Ning Yingying was the closest thing he'd had to a friend on Cang Qiong Mountain, and she'd gotten him into more trouble than anyone else. She'd done it well meaningly and with good intentions, but that hadn't changed the way his bruises ached. But he'd never held it against her, never told her off for it, and never spurned her. She was, after all, his only friend. The only person who would smile at him and mean it, the only person who was ever happy to see him, or who was upset on his behalf. How could he do anything but cling to her, no matter how much worse it made things for him?

Ning Yingying got him into trouble in the exact same way that the Little Palace Mistress gets Gongyi Xiao into trouble. She's only trying to help, but all she's accomplishing is throwing extra fuel on the fire. The fact that she cares is the only true balm she can offer. That might sound like nothing, but Luo Binghe knows how precious such a small thing can be. To Gongyi Xiao, it might be the only true comfort he has.

Luo Binghe should take it away from him.

Later, he thinks. Not right now. It's not a good time for it, she's still too attached to him. It'll work better if he waits for a better opportunity, if he works up to it. It can wait. Gongyi Xiao can keep her and her two edged loyalty for just a little longer. It's only to Luo Binghe's benefit to let him.

"I respect him," Luo Binghe says.

"It's your only redeeming feature," the Little Palace Mistress replies haughtily, twisting her hair into a simple style behind her head. She's likely more used to having other people style it for her. Luo Binghe might offer to do it for her, but that would be too tender and servile of a gesture. "That, and you know how to fight. You at least hit back."

"I would've thought that you'd have liked having a terrified punching bag to take your feelings out on," Luo Binghe remarks.

"If I wanted that, then I could use the actual training dummies," she mutters, stabbing a pin through her hair with a violent motion. She has such delicate, pretty features, and they're almost always twisted up into a fierce scowl.

Luo Binghe hums.

“Gongyi-shixiong is a good fighter too,” he says. And then: “I wish I’d actually seen him fight at the Immortal Alliance Conference.”

“He was wonderful,” the Little Palace Mistress declares firmly.

There it is.

Luo Binghe has already tried having this conversation today. It was with the Qin sisters, and it had been utterly useless. The only thing the sisters had remembered had been him helping them, and then the demon invasion, and then all the death and grief after that. Huan Hua Palace Sect lost more disciples than any other sect in the disaster, and it seems like the horror of it overshadowed everything else. If Gongyi Xiao had acted strangely at all, or made any odd remarks, then no one noticed or remembers it. The tragedy blots out everything else.

But he’s found the one exception in all of the sect right here. If there’s anyone in the world who would find Gongyi Xiao’s behavior and welfare to be more notable and important than the deaths of over a hundred disciples, then it would be the Little Palace Mistress. No one else matters next to him.

“What was he like back then?” Luo Binghe asks. “Was he as talented as he is now, or have his skills grown over time?”

“Gongyi-shixiong is always working on improving his skills,” the Little Palace Mistress says, and he can see how the tense, unhappy lines of her soften and warm a little at the subject. Having her dear Gongyi-shixiong be acknowledged and praised for his talents is clearly soothing something inside of her. “He trains every day.”

Luo Binghe remembers Gongyi Xiao’s neat and meticulously performed stances and moves, as if he’d sprung to life from the demonstrative illustrations in a scroll about sword figures.

“I can believe that,” he says. “How did he take his victory? With supreme modesty and humility, I assume.”

“Of course,” the Little Palace Mistress confirms. There’s a note of exasperation to her voice, as if she thinks he should’ve taken the chance to preen and brag over his accomplishments. “All of those demons attacked and everyone died, so *that’s* what everyone had to talk about instead.”

She sounds a little bit like she thinks that Gongyi Xiao was wronged to be so unfairly overshadowed. Who exactly is she mad at? The demons? The mourners? Or the people who *died?*

Luo Binghe can’t help but smile a little at her obvious disgruntlement.

And then she goes on: “Everything was such a mess that people barely paid attention when he got sick. It was just yet another thing going wrong to them.”

“Oh?” Luo Binghe asks, his attention sharpening. “Gongyi Xiao became sick?”

The Little Palace Mistress nods.

“It happened shortly after he came home from the Conference,” she explains. “He was *fine* when he came back, but then a couple of days later he fell down in the middle of the training grounds! The healers said that it was his injuries and demonic poison catching up with him. They should’ve caught it *sooner!* Poor Gongyi-shixiong, he got so sick and feverish that he almost *died.”*

“That’s awful,” Luo Binghe says, his mind racing. Does this mean anything at all, or is it just irrelevant history? “Did it take him a long time to recover?”

“He only had to stay in the infirmary for a few days,” she says. “It hit him hard and fast. But he wasn’t himself for weeks afterwards!”

“How so?”

“He was quiet,” the Little Palace Mistress says. “And uncertain and - flinchy. And this happened while everyone was still all upset and scared about all of those disciples being killed at the Conference, so no one cared that *he* needed time to recover. They thought that just because he was standing again then that meant he could work. I had to fend everyone off just so he could rest!”

Quiet, uncertain, flinchy. As a result of his near death experience? Or of having lived through the demon invasion at the Immortal Alliance Conference, and all the death he must have seen there as he fought for his life? Or… because he saw something he shouldn’t have?

“Did he ever talk to you about it?” he asks her. “What he experienced at the Conference, I mean.”

“No,” the Little Palace Mistress says, frowning. “He never talks about it at all.”

That could mean… quite literally anything. It could be secretiveness over something he’d witnessed, or just simply scars from living through the carnage of a demon invasion.

There’s only so much he can learn from secondhand sources.

“I see,” Luo Binghe says. He gets up, summoning Xin Mo to his hand so he can sheathe it at his side once again.

He looks down at the Little Palace Mistress, her whip a loose coil around her, clutching a handful of golden hairpins in her hand with a simpler hairstyle than before, her clothes dirty and disarrayed. His blood is underneath her nails, small droplets staining her robes and face from when he’d been looming over her.

“If you’re looking for a fight, then just find me,” he tells her again. “It’s better than you whipping random disciples for the crime of speaking of Gongyi-shixiong without complete reverence. You’re really not helping him.”

Her sweet, delicate, bloodstained face screws up with a furious sort of helplessness.

“I’m not helping him either way,” she grits out. “At least my way, they suffer too.”

“And Gongyi-shixiong suffers more. You keep telling me you’re not an idiot. Prove it.”

She clutches at her hairpins like she’s trying to snap them in half. The soft metal bends instead, bowing underneath her strength.

“It can’t be that the best thing I can do for him is *nothing,”* she rasps. “I’m the daughter of the Sect Leader. I’m fierce with my whip. Everyone fears me. How is it that I can’t help him at all? When he *needs* my help? I’m *right here!* I *want* to help!”

“You really are a spoiled child,” Luo Binghe says softly. “Is this the first time in your life that you haven’t gotten something just because you wanted it? Does it hurt, Fu-shimei? This is the sort of pain that normal people swallow every day.”

She throws her bent and warped golden hairpins at him. They clatter harmlessly at his feet, not piercing his robes or even making much of an impact. They’re too light.

“How dare you?” she gasps out. She’s so angry that she trembles with it, looks like she’s on the verge of frustrated tears. “You have no idea the things I’ve wanted and been denied.”

He can imagine it. She’d probably been a very lonely child once, wishing that she could be enough like everyone else to be one of them. An obvious impossibility that she would’ve had no choice but to force herself to accept, defiantly embracing her position as if she ever had any other alternative.

“How tragic for you,” Luo Binghe says, merciless. “I see it now. *You’re* the victim here. You’re the one who’s being--”

“Oh, *shut up!”* she snaps, pushing herself up to her feet.

Good. Challenge me. Push back.

“Who do you think you are? Showing up here and acting as if you’ve known him for years, as if you only have his best interests at heart and no one knows better than you. What have you actually *done* besides act superior? You can sneer at me all you like if you do something to *actually help him,”* she throws out, jabbing a finger into his chest, glaring up into the eyes of the man who’s behind all the suffering of her dearest and only friend. “Prove me wrong. Make me look like an idiot. I’ll let you give me a *hundred* lashes with Meigu Ci if you can manage that!”

It sounds like a challenge, a dare, and pleading all at once. Like she’s bargaining with him, trying to find his price to fix all of this. Of course she’d think, deep down to the heart of her, that if she can just pay steeply enough then the problem will go away. That’s how it’s always worked for her in the past. Luo Binghe might feel disdainful, if it weren’t for the fact that she’s using *herself* as a bargaining chip instead of any amount of gold or status.

She really does love Gongyi Xiao.

“... I didn’t say that there’s no way for you to help him,” Luo Binghe says. “Just that this isn’t it.”

“What is it, then?” she demands, half fury and half desperation. “What can I do?”

“Be there for him,” Luo Binghe says simply.

“That’s it? *That’s* all I can do for him? Hold his hand as the sect turns its back on him?”

“It’s more than nothing,” he says. *It’s everything.*

The Little Palace Mistress makes an unhappy noise and turns her back on him. She’d clearly been hoping for more. Something tangible and solid, an act she could wrap her hands around to save Gongyi Xiao fully and completely. He’s disappointed her with his realistic and practical advice.

Why is he giving her real advice?

To stop her from doing things like this, of course. So that people will become comfortable with talking poorly about Gongyi Xiao. If what Luo Binghe tells her sounds sincere or genuine, then that’s only to raise her esteem for him. She is, after all, not an idiot. This is a woman who recognizes falseness when she sees it. He has to make sure to include a kernel of truth in his lies, or else she’ll never choose him over Gongyi Xiao. That’s all.

“I really did enjoy fighting you, Fu-shimei,” he says. “You don’t flinch or hesitate. I like it.”

“Leave,” she says, refusing to turn around to face him, her neck bent. Her hands are curled up into tight fists at her sides. “I *hate you.”*

“Feel however you like,” he replies lightly, and he turns around and walks away. Leaving the Little Palace Mistress alone in the Peach Orchard, as if this lush and sprawling garden is her private room to eject people from as she wishes.

If she doesn’t want to be seen crying, then that’s her choice.

Chapter End Notes

Meigui Ci: Thorn of a rose

The Water Prison

Chapter Summary

> “You should be Head Disciple instead.”
>
> Luo Binghe laughs good naturedly, as if those aren’t the words that he’s been waiting for someone to say out loud ever since he first came here.

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is 9.5k words long.
>
> Some messed up stuff happens in this chapter, so check out the endnotes if you want specific warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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>
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“Tang-shidi, don’t flatter me,” he says, friendly and smiling. “I’m just doing my part.”

“No, really!” Tang Enlai insists earnestly. “Luo-shixiong, you do so much more than just your part! *No one* does more than you. You’re always volunteering for duties that aren’t yours, and taking on extra tasks.”

Whose duties he volunteers for, and whose tasks he takes on, goes unsaid.

“Binghe’s very hardworking,” Qin Wanyue agrees warmly. “Even back at the Immortal Alliance Conference, he was taking care of people he didn’t need to.”

They’re sitting in the Gold Dining Hall, half a dozen or so disciples all companionably gathered around Luo Binghe as they eat. The food is rich and well made, the meat sumptuous enough to melt in the mouth, bright glazed fruits dotting the dish like ornamental jewels. Qin Wanrong keeps impishly stealing them from his plate, leading Qin Wanyue to nobly and martyrishly replace them with the fruits from her own meal. She has a look on her face that says that she’d be willing to starve for Luo Binghe’s sake, and she’d never voice a word of complaint - she’d just lounge around waifishly, sighing tragically as she wastes away from her own selfless love.

If Qin Wanrong uses shameless enthusiasm as her weapon of choice, then Qin Wanyue's is pitiful victimhood. Luo Binghe wonders if it's purely practical, or if there's a part of her that's secretly enjoying her tragic, unrequited love story.

"I *wanted* to do that," Luo Binghe demures. "So I really wasn't being all that selfless."

"I heard you even scolded the Little Palace Mistress yesterday," Tang Enlai says, in the same way someone might say *I heard you fought a tiger barehanded.* "Properly scolded her, I mean."

"Serves her right!" Qin Wanrong crows. With a remarkable amount of hypocrisy, she adds, "That's what she gets for always being such a brat."

He had done far more than scold her, but they hadn't exactly had an audience. People had apparently made up their own narrative in the absence of the truth, piecing together a story with the haphazard evidence left behind. Had the Little Palace Mistress left the Peach Orchard with blotchy and tear stained cheeks?

"Doesn't Gongyi-shixiong scold her too?" Luo Binghe asks.

"Well, sure, but not *properly.* He'll tell her not to use her whip on her martial siblings, or to not insult people, but he's not stern about it. He doesn't want to upset her, so he just chides her a little. She only behaves herself when he's around!" Tang Enlai says. "She needs someone who isn't afraid to really dress her down, or else she'll just keep being a menace forever!"

Luo Binghe thinks it's a bit rich to hear that from someone who had stepped away from the Little Palace Mistress when she'd passed him in the hall so quickly that he'd actually fallen onto his ass. Now that she isn't present, all of a sudden he's all boldness and judgment. It makes him want to throw Tang Enlai onto her nonexistent mercy just a little bit. Watch him try and say any of this to her *face.*

"I'm sure he does his best with her," Luo Binghe says. "He's just a little too nice, that's all."

"That's what I'm saying," Tang Enlai says. "It's all well and good to be nice, but there's such a thing as being *too* nice, especially when you're Head Disciple."

"Su Xiyan was much admired for her reserved and cold demeanor," Shao Wenling comments - although she's young enough that she couldn't have even been born when the woman was still alive. "She was courteous and dignified without being personable or easygoing. Everyone respected her for it."

"Have you been listening to Hallmaster Hou go on about her again?" Han Xiaodan asks teasingly. "She's been dead for over two decades, and he's *still* in love with her. It's a little embarrassing."

"She's well remembered for a *reason,"* Shao Wenling replies coolly, and Luo Binghe wonders if she's perhaps trying to emulate this much admired dead woman. It would line up with her behavior, so deliberately mature and restrained.

“Luo-shixiong would be a better fit,” Tang Enlai persists, like a dog with a bone. “Gongyi-shixiong’s just too… he’s a little bit…”

“Overrated,” Qin Wanrong finishes for him.

Qin Wanyue blinks, and leans so she can look past Luo Binghe to her sister.

“Overrated?” she asks. “Since when do you think that?”

“I’ve always thought it,” Qin Wanrong proclaims loftily. “He’s a little bit full of himself, isn’t he? Just because he’s a little good with his sword, has a passable face, and the Little Palace Mistress is in love with him!”

It’s quite a change of heart from her previous warm declarations of appreciation and admiration, but Luo Binghe isn’t surprised. This is his doing, after all. He paid Qin Wanrong’s dreams a visit last night, wearing Gongyi Xiao’s face. By the time he left, the woman had been furious and in tears, swearing that she loathed him with all her heart. It had just been a dream, of course, but so what? The feelings that dreams stir up can feel just as real as the ones in the waking world, and they’re not always so easy to shake off. It had been his prediction that Qin Wanrong would be the sort to hold the actions of what someone does in her dreams against them in waking life, and it turns out that he was entirely correct in that assessment.

“It’s really a little improper, isn’t it?” Tang Enlai asks eagerly, looking to Luo Binghe as if for approval. “I mean, that the Head Disciple has such a relationship with the Sect Leader’s daughter? He lets her get away with anything! And who’s to say that he didn’t get his position in the first place *because* of her attachment to him?”

“He’s like her pet,” Qin Wanrong says cattily. “Maybe the Old Palace Master got him for her as a birthday present!”

Han Xiaodan snorts a laugh in the middle of drinking water, and Shao Wenling has to clap her firmly on the back.

Luo Binghe takes another bite of his meal. It’s excellently cooked, made with expensive spices and high quality ingredients. He doesn’t particularly taste it, though. It’s distracting, thinking about how much he looks down on everyone at this table. How *easy* they’ve been for him to trick and manipulate, turn to his side. Only a few months ago they adored Gongyi Xiao, and here they are now, cheerfully mocking him.

The Little Palace Mistress might be undiplomatic and tactless, but at least her loyalty isn’t this easily shifted. He might honestly respect her for it, even though it’s entirely opposed to his plans. It’s a good thing that these people are easily shifted. It’s good, and so he has no reason to let it fill him with so much… *disdain.*

“Isn’t it the other way around?” Han Xiaodan says, wiping at her chin with her sleeve. “I thought *she* was *his--”*

Luo Binghe sets down his chopsticks.

“I’m finished eating,” he says, getting up.

“Already?” Qin Wanyue asks, startled and dismayed. “You haven’t even emptied your plate.”

“It was more filling than I expected,” Luo Binghe replies. “Besides, I’m going to have a busy day. I should get moving. I’ll see you later.”

“What are you going to be--”

Luo Binghe drifts away as if he doesn’t hear the question, leaving the Gold Dining Hall behind him. He doesn’t want any hangerons attaching themselves to him today. He has a plan, and he won’t have it interfered with.

It’s long past time that he confronts Gongyi Xiao more directly.

Luo Binghe’s search for the man doesn’t take too long. He only has to ask a little here and there, and he’s led in the right direction. Declining popularity or not, he’s still the Head Disciple for now. People notice him when he walks by.

He finds him in the library. Huan Hua Palace is large and sprawling enough to have many of them, but this is *the* library. Towering shelves of gilt edged books and scrolls reach for the high ceilings, a maze within a vast cavern. Especially rare or expensive scrolls and books are laid out on display on pedestals, and beautiful statues are scattered throughout the place. There is an unmistakable sense that this impressive collection is more for the sake of being shown off and to be admired than to actually be *read.*

Luo Binghe wanders through the shelves, and quickly understands just how confusingly labyrinthian the library truly is. The shelves are so tall that you can’t actually see any landmarks once you’re within the midst of them, and all of the rich and lovely bindings quickly start to look the same. It was made to be lost in.

He understands. It’s like the endless maze of interlocking gardens, and the secret trick of reading the pavingstones. There’s some sort of trick hidden in plain sight to make this disorienting place easy to read for anyone who knows it, leaving strangers and visitors in the dark. This is, apparently, a classic Huan Hua powermove and security measure in the same stroke.

It doesn’t matter. He’ll learn the trick later. For now, all he has to do is politely ask a few attendants if they’ve seen Head Disciple Gongyi, and he’s helpfully pointed in the right direction.

“... can’t be expected to accomplish the impossible.” Gongyi Xiao’s voice drifts through the air, discreetly low and quiet. Luo Binghe automatically changes the weight and pace of his gait, becoming slow and soundless. “It’s a game that you can’t ever win, no matter how hard you try. To act as if you can is only cruel to you.”

Luo Binghe presses himself flat against a shelf, peeking around the corner of it. There's a discreet reading nook hidden between two bookshelves, and Gongyi Xiao is sitting there, a forgotten book discarded at his side. And next to him sits… Xie Ruonlan, her round little face screwed up like she's fighting mightily against the tears sliding down her cheeks, clutching a letter to her chest. She keeps swallowing thickly, her chest hitching with each breath, but she doesn't let a single sob escape her.

"But she said-- she said--"

"I saw," Gongyi Xiao says, like he doesn't want to make her force herself through the sentence. His whole body is turned towards her, a hand laid on her back. He sounds gentle, gentle, gentle. "But she wasn't being honest, Xie-shimei. If you really had managed it sooner, or better, then she would only tell you that you should have managed it even sooner than that, or even better still. She's not being fair."

"You don't know--" Xie Ruonlan's voice cracks in two halfway through, and she goes completely silent to make it stop - seems to even stop breathing.

"I do know," Gongyi Xiao says firmly. "I know *you,* Xie-shimei. You always, always try your best. You're a good reader and a quick learner, and you work so hard. And yet I don't think I've ever *once* heard about your mother praising you, or telling you that you've done well. That's not right. If she were being truthful, then she would have had to admit that you're doing incredibly well for your age, and yet she never does. Instead, she always says that you just *barely* didn't manage it. That if only you had done a little more, gone a little bigger, then she'd be proud of you. Why is it that you can only ever come *close,* but never actually get there? If it's so close then you should have managed it at least once, if only as a fluke. But you don't, and it's because she's lying. She dangles success in front of you, always just out of your reach. It's cruel, and it's not right or fair. You've done nothing to deserve it."

Xie Ruonlan is holding herself painfully still, like she might shatter if she so much as twitches. With slow and careful movements, Gongyi Xiao reaches out and gently pulls the letter out of her grip. He sets it aside, out of the way, like it's something unsightly.

"She's not," Xie Ruonlan says. "She-- she's not mean. Mama's *nice."*

Gongyi Xiao makes an expression like he disagrees, but only for a short second before he quickly wipes it away.

"Maybe she thinks that she's helping you," he grants. "Motivating you. But I don't think it's doing anything but making you miserable. I just don't want you to work so hard for something that you're never going to get that you end up crashing and burning, Xie-shimei. I'm not saying that you can't love your mother, but… you don't need to let her break your heart like this over and over again."

A shudder goes through her, and Gongyi Xiao pulls her against his side. Xie Ruonlan hides her face against his robes and trembles, and he strokes at her shoulder soothingly.

"It's okay," Gongyi Xiao murmurs softly. "It's okay, you're going to be alright."

Luo Binghe… backs off. A good actor knows at what moment to enter the stage, and this isn't it. He distances himself until he can only hear the faintest suggestion of Xie Ruonlan's swallowed sobs, Gongyi Xiao's quiet comforting.

He waits.

From the discarded book that Gongyi Xiao had clearly been reading at some point earlier, Luo Binghe gets the impression that he wasn't the one who sought out Xie Ruonlan, but the other way around. She got the letter, and then came here - the Little Palace Mistress mentioned once that Gongyi Xiao could almost always be relied upon to be found here, didn't she? Meaning that it was intentional. She'd gone to find Gongyi Xiao on purpose, because she'd received an upsetting letter from her mother. She wanted guidance and comfort, and so she went to him.

There are still people in this palace who trust Gongyi Xiao. Luo Binghe had walked away from a table of his peers making fun of the Head Disciple this morning, but that's still not the unanimous opinion of the sect - only the popular one. There are still exceptions, people who have had personal interactions with Gongyi Xiao and remember him warmly, who are willing to forgive and look past present mistakes in favor of his past kindnesses. What does Xie Ruonlan care about Gongyi Xiao making a mistake on some mission she was never a part of and never affected by? What does it matter to her compared to *this?*

How many Xie Ruonlans are there in the sect? It can't be that many. Even if Gongyi Xiao has been generally friendly and helpful, and gone out of his way to specifically help someone with a personal issue about once every few days, that still comes out to a small minority of the sect. Especially when the people who *won't* show proper gratitude, remember what he's done for them, or stand by him once his fortunes shift are taken into account.

And really, at the end of the day, Xie Ruonlan is ten years old. *She's* the sort of person that Gongyi Xiao helps; the ones who need the personal rescue of the Head Disciple. Children with families who won't help them, weak people without anyone else to turn to for support. They are, in a way, the least important or powerful members of the sect. The ones with the least sway, the least influence. The least dangerous.

So, strictly speaking, Luo Binghe doesn't *need* to do anything about this. He doesn't have to find a way to sabotage it. Whether this girl trusts Gongyi Xiao enough to seek comfort from him or not doesn't matter. It won't affect the plan. It won't change the end result. She won't be able to do or say anything to stop it. Not even if there are a dozen of her, or two dozen, or even more than that. Luo Binghe's supporters are in the majority.

The idea of accepting and ignoring a weakness, however small, sits *wrong* in his chest. Like he's leaving his back unprotected, allowing a chink to be made in his armor that might be exploited later. The way to win and survive is to do so ruthlessly and completely, scorching and salting the earth of your enemies as thoroughly as possible. Lazy half measures are the slack rope that you can be hanged with.

Luo Binghe should be merciless. He should grab every knife that he can to stab into Gongyi Xiao's back, no matter how small. He should be thorough and comprehensive, making sure that there won't be a single shred of a chance for this man to withstand his assault, to crawl

his way back, to seek revenge. Luo Binghe has sworn to himself to completely and utterly destroy anyone who dares oppose him, unwitting or not, and that's not a promise that he's going to break. People must learn that to resist or fight him is not only futile, but a deathwish. He will never be weak again.

He should do something. He should--

"--you sure that you don't want me to come with you?"

Luo Binghe moves into the shadows.

"'M sure," Xie Ruonlan says, her voice thick but determined. She comes out of the reading nook, her eyes red and face ruddy, but no longer actively crying. "I can find my way back to my room by myself, Gongyi-shixiong. I'm not a little kid."

"Of course you aren't," Gongyi Xiao agrees indulgently. "But everyone needs help sometimes. That's not a sign of immaturity."

"You've already helped," Xie Ruonlan says, tilting her chin back with great dignity despite her flushed and tear stained face. Clearly, her pride can't take much more coddling after her earlier display. "I can take care of myself from here, thank you."

"It is as you say, Xie-shimei," Gongyi Xiao concedes. "I'm glad you sought me out in the first place; please let me know if there's anything else. I'll take good care of your letter for you."

"Good," Xie Ruonlan says, as if graciously dismissing a servant. With that she departs, walking straight by Luo Binghe's hiding spot without a glance. He waits until he can't hear her footsteps any longer, and then soundlessly leaves it.

He finds Gongyi Xiao seated, staring sightlessly down at a letter in his hands. His brow is furrowed and his eyes distant, clearly deep in thought. He doesn't even notice Luo Binghe until he lets his shadow fall over the man. Luo Binghe watches him closely, his gaze rapt on his face to take in every twitch of expression that he can.

First, Gongyi Xiao's gaze flicks up to see who the intruder is. Then, a widening of the eyes of recognition. A fraction of a second of his body tightening, muscles going tense as he curls ever so slightly inward. Just as quickly, however, he sits up straight, his face going still and clear like an undisturbed lake.

"Luo-shidi," Gongyi Xiao says, just like he's only stumbled across a familiar face at an unexpected time. "What are you doing here?"

Had that been fear? Hatred, anger, disgust? Or had it been nothing at all? It had been so brief, so minute. It practically hadn't happened at all.

"I was looking for you, Gongyi-shixiong," Luo Binghe says, threading his fingers behind his back. "I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

He glances pointedly down at the letter still in Gongyi Xiao's hands. Xie Ruonlan had left it with him in his safekeeping; had it been Gongyi Xiao's suggestion? To keep her from reading it over and over again, perhaps.

"Not at all," Gongyi Xiao says, and he folds up the letter and tucks it away into an inner pocket of his robes without so much as glancing at it, his movements smooth and unhurried. "What is it that you wanted my help with?"

"I've been assigned my first shift in the Water Prison," Luo Binghe says pleasantly. "And I was hoping that you'd help show me around? I've never been there before."

"Ah," Gongyi Xiao says. "I don't go down into the Water Prison often."

"But you have gone," Luo Binghe says. "It's my understanding that all Huan Hua Palace disciples have to gain some experience in the Water Prison at some point, right? Everyone here is expected to be familiar with it, to be able to work there if necessary."

"Yes, that's correct," Gongyi Xiao admits. "But there are others who are far more familiar with the Water Prison than me, who would be of much more assistance to you. I could find--"

"I'd be much more reassured having the personal assistance of Gongyi-shixiong," Luo Binghe smoothly interrupts. "I already asked the Old Palace Master if I could expect your help; he assured me I could."

There's a moment, and then Gongyi Xiao smiles. "I see. Very well, then. When should we go?"

"Right now works," Luo Binghe says. "If that's fine with you? You did say earlier that I wasn't disturbing you."

"I did," Gongyi Xiao agrees. "Let me just put this book away in its proper place, and I'll be with you."

Luo Binghe assents, and waits obediently as Gongyi Xiao rises to do just that. The Head Disciple's stride is calm and steady, utterly impenetrable. Luo Binghe studies it to see if he can find any signs of tension, of hurriedness, but if there are then they're carefully tucked away out of sight. Gongyi Xiao is behaving exactly in the way that he always has around Luo Binghe: with unassailable good manners and utterly maddening inscrutability.

If he remembers the dream from two nights ago at all, then he doesn't show it. Luo Binghe would have invaded Gongyi Xiao's dreams last night as well, if he'd only been able to. He'd searched ceaselessly for his sleeping mind all night, but it had never appeared in the Dream Realm. Gongyi Xiao did not sleep last night - or if he did, then he did so lightly enough that it hardly counted as rest at all.

The dark circles underneath his eyes are contrasted by the unhealthy paleness of his face, making them stand out all the more. No wonder that it's been so easy for Luo Binghe to

spread rumors about the Head Disciple being overwhelmed and in over his head; he *looks* like he is. He looks like he hasn't had a single good night's sleep in months.

Not since Luo Binghe arrived here, in fact.

Is that a coincidence?

It could be. But Luo Binghe is beginning to dislike just how many coincidences tend to crop up around Gongyi Xiao.

"There," Gongyi Xiao says, reappearing. "Apologies for keeping you waiting; let's go."

Gongyi Xiao goes, and Luo Binghe follows. The Head Disciple navigates the winding, labyrinthian shelves seemingly without thought or effort, as if the path is second nature to him. He appears to notice Luo Binghe's attention, because he points at one of the statues as they pass it.

"If you pay attention to their hands, then you'll see that they tend to gesture in some way in one direction. If you follow them, you'll walk the quickest path out of the library."

"I see," Luo Binghe says, and then he tilts his head and smiles. "How convenient. You don't seem to be looking at the statues, however."

"Well-- I remember the path on my own," Gongyi Xiao says, seeming slightly flustered at having this pointed out. "They're mostly there for people unfamiliar with the library, after all."

Luo Binghe hums.

"And what if I want to find a particular section, or a specific book? Is there a trick for that as well?"

"Yes," Gongyi Xiao says. "Ask one of the librarians to guide you."

A little laugh trips out of his mouth, surprising him with the fact that it *isn't* deliberate and artificial. That's the first time Gongyi Xiao has ever made a joke in front of him; he hadn't been expecting it. Gongyi Xiao looks at him as if he's equally surprised by his laughter, before looking away.

"And I'm guessing that you don't need to use this clever little trick either," Luo Binghe says.

"I do know where and what all of the sections are," Gongyi Xiao grants. "But I absolutely don't know where to find any specific book I might want without having to check. Even if I managed to read a whole book every single day for the rest of my life, I wouldn't be able to read everything in this library."

He almost sounds wistful as he says this, as if he thinks it a sad shame.

"Are you so sure?" Luo Binghe asks. "Skilled cultivators can live for centuries. You could have all the time in the world, for all you know."

The hint of wistfulness gets wiped away, replaced by that impenetrable, inoffensive blankness.

Your time is over, the Luo Binghe in the dream had said.

“Perhaps,” Gongyi Xiao concedes, in a way that seems almost designed to politely kill the conversation.

They walk in silence. Luo Binghe becomes intensely aware of his own body language, his gait, the breath in his lungs. It all suddenly feels utterly artificial, every last inch of him an act, a deception. A role he’s playing.

In a way, it is. He is always lying, always acting, always playing a role. His demonic traits hidden, presenting himself as a righteous human cultivator with no agenda, no ill will. But this is something he’s so used to that it feels like second nature at this point, not something worthy of constant awareness and thought. It’s the fact that *Gongyi Xiao* is so clearly playing a role as well that makes it feel stiff and fake all over again. Here they both are, lying to each other. Both of them hiding their true thoughts and feelings, instead presenting the image of what they *should* be thinking and feeling. It’s like a scripted conversation between two actors; it’s not a true conversation at all, not a real interaction. It’s words with nothing inside them.

Luo Binghe had become so distracted by the thought that Gongyi Xiao might know that he’s a half demon that he’s almost entirely neglected everything else he learned in that dream. That Gongyi Xiao thinks that Luo Binghe is here to steal his life from him - that Gongyi Xiao *knows* that Luo Binghe is here to steal his life.

He knows, and yet here he is, helpfully pointing out to him the trick for navigating the library, agreeing to show him around the Water Prison. Speaking to him politely and civilly, no hint of fear or hatred in his manner.

Luo Binghe has dealt with people who have smiled at him to his face and then acted against him behind his back. Hell, he *is* that person, right fucking now. He knows that a friendly smile doesn’t necessarily mean that he isn’t looking at an enemy. But Gongyi Xiao has made no moves against him. Not even subtle, behind-his-back ones. There are no sordid rumors being spread about Luo Binghe, he has been framed for no crimes, people are not turning against him with no clear reason or source. His position keeps rising and rising, and Gongyi Xiao has done *nothing* to stop it.

Why the hell not? Luo Binghe could justify his inaction before as nothing more than a certain lack of cutthroat-edness, inadequate survival instincts, being unwilling to do what’s necessary to protect his position. But now he knows for a *fact* that Gongyi Xiao has realized what is happening to him. That he’s being replaced. Luo Binghe doesn’t know if Gongyi Xiao has realized just exactly how responsible the newcomer is for all of his recent misfortunes, but the man has read the writing on the wall well enough to see the clear and obvious trajectory of things: Luo Binghe is on the rise, and Gongyi Xiao is falling. Once the time comes, Luo Binghe won’t hesitate to steal his position for himself.

And yet, still nothing. It's equal parts baffling and infuriating, and Luo Binghe doesn't understand it. It doesn't make sense. He doesn't trust it. There *must* be a trap hidden within his behavior, some sort of trick that Luo Binghe isn't seeing. There is an explanation that will make the locked box that is Gongyi Xiao unfold for him, turn him into something known and understood, and Luo Binghe will find it even if he has to *pry it out of him.*

Gongyi Xiao leads him out of the library and through the halls, out of the palace and into the bright and vivid gardens, and straight towards a square, imposing building that stands by itself. It's as obviously expensive and opulent as every other part of Huan Hua Palace, but seems to be designed to tilt more towards *intimidation* than *awe* . There's something looming and forbidding about its grandness, the lines sharp and severe. It casts a shadow you could drown in.

It's right out in the open, too. There's no misdirection or trickery meant to make it subtle or hard to find. It's there in plain sunlight, grand and imposing and impossible to miss.

"This is the main entrance to the prison," Gongyi Xiao explains. "It's where the prisoners are processed before being taken downstairs."

'Main entrance' means that there are *other* entrances. That makes sense. Huan Hua Palace is so massive and sprawling, there are hundreds of different places where a small, subtle door might be hidden - especially when you take Huan Hua's tendency towards illusion arrays into account. Secret exits and entrances for all the comings and goings that don't *fit* with the menacing front presented by this daunting building. Cleaning and maintenance, food deliveries and more.

And more… sordid things as well, almost certainly. If a prisoner dies, where would their corpse be carried out? The main entrance for all to see, or discreetly slipped out one of the secret ones like something that's unfit for polite society to have to witness?

Luo Binghe determines to find and learn each and every one of these hidden entrances.

There are guards at either side of the doors to the processing building, but they're allowed inside at once - Luo Binghe notes the way that the guards' eyes flick towards the golden medallion around Gongyi Xiao's neck, as if for confirmation. The Head Disciple has clearance to enter the Water Prison at any time, apparently.

The inside of the building is the same as its outside, the wealth on display oozing superior contempt and narrow eyed suspicion. It makes Luo Binghe think of a rich noble, dripping with riches and silently *daring* some filthy streetrat to steal from them with their dirty hands, whip at the ready in almost eager anticipation.

"When it's your shift you'll be expected," Gongyi Xiao says. "You won't need anyone to escort you inside."

"And what if it's not my shift?"

"You'll need to have a scroll signed and marked with a wax seal from an appropriate person to prove your permission to enter at an unscheduled time."

“Like from you, Gongyi-shixiong?”

“... I suppose so.”

Luo Binghe hums, filing the information away. The set up with the Water Prison, with blanket access given to higher members with no need to explain themselves and secret exits and entrances, seems primed to allow for abuses of power. Prisoners might be added, removed, or privately visited with little to no oversight. One could conceivably have someone imprisoned without having others know about it; to claim to have someone imprisoned while in reality there is nothing but an empty cell; to treat a prisoner however one might wish where no one else can see or hear them.

It will be a very good resource to have once he’s Sect Leader.

Someone writes their names and the time down in a ledger, and then Gongyi Xiao takes him down a flight of stairs. And down, and down, and down. It goes on for much longer than Luo Binghe had anticipated, until the only light comes from the uneven, yellow flickering torches on the walls. All sound from the surface slips away. It feels as if they're being swallowed up by the earth.

“Here,” Gongyi Xiao says, stopping at a seemingly random step. The flight continues downwards into yawning darkness tinged with flickering torchlight, but Gongyi Xiao turns to the side and - just like that - there’s a door there to be opened.

“How did you know to stop here?” Luo Binghe asks as Gongyi Xiao walks through the door.

“I kept count of the steps,” Gongyi Xiao answers. “Sorry, I should have said so at the start. It’s a hundred and one steps exactly. If you keep walking then you’ll just end up back at the top again without noticing - it’s a sort of loop.”

Luo Binghe makes a noise of interest, and then steps into the Water Prison.

It couldn’t possibly be more different from the surface of Huan Hua Palace. That’s clear from the very first inhale - the air tastes damp and cold and close down here, not fresh and green. It’s dark and gloomy, light being cast by either torches or engraved illumination arrays on the walls, weak and faltering or placed far enough away from each other so that the shadows pool dark and deep in between, rendering the corners of this place unfamiliar and treacherous, the ceiling looming overhead unseen and unknown.

“Follow me closely, Luo-shidi,” Gongyi Xiao says. “There’s a maze array built into the very foundation stones of this place. If you aren’t already familiar with the path then you’ll lose your way easily.”

To make escapes or breakouts next to impossible, of course.

“How will I navigate it when my shift comes?” Luo Binghe asks, staying close to Gongyi Xiao’s side as requested.

“You just need to be shown where everything is by someone who already knows it,” Gongyi Xiao assures him. “Once you’re invited to ‘know’ the place, the array leaves you alone. It’s part of why prisoners are blindfolded when they’re first taken to their cells.”

“How convenient.”

Gongyi Xiao leads him down halls with condensation glistening on the rough walls, and Luo Binghe is reminded of nothing more than a cave. Large, winding, and sprawling - but still a cave, just barely chiseled and carved into something that doesn’t look wild and untamed. They pass other cultivators as they walk, all in at least pairs of two, who glance at them but not much else - but they often find themselves entirely alone in a hall.

“Here are the first cells,” Gongyi Xiao says, and there they are.

All along both sides of the hall there are cells carved into the walls. They look rudimentary, rough and unpolished, the walls barely far enough for three paces across and the ceiling only just tall enough to stand. The cells are completely empty, both of people or any other features at all. There are no doors or bars separating the cell from the hall, but they instead stand free and open, with nothing visible to stop a person from walking right out from them. There’s a groove that runs along the edge of the floor on each side, like a street gutter.

“Are these cells unfinished?” Luo Binghe asks curiously, inspecting them as they walk by. He wouldn’t think that Huan Hua would *need* to make more cells. The Water Prison has been infamous for generations now; why would they suddenly be lacking in space after being the preferred pit to throw cultivators into for so long?

“Hm?” Gongyi Xiao follows Luo Binghe’s gaze. “Ah - no. This is what most of them look like. We have some that are more elaborate for the more powerful cultivators, or the rare demonic prisoner, but the bulk of them are like this. You’ll see some that are actively in use soon, I think I can hear some right around the corner…”

What he means by *hearing* them becomes clear once they turn. The walls are dotted with those small, carved out cells here as well, but unlike the last hall they were in, Luo Binghe can’t look into a handful of them. This is because water sheets down like a curtain down from the ceiling to the floor, the water streaming away in the gutter to be channeled somewhere else. Gongyi Xiao had known by hearing the rush of the water.

“Make sure not to touch any of the water,” Gongyi Xiao warns. “It’s enchanted to burn like acid.”

“I’ll be careful,” Luo Binghe assures him. So, that’s why it’s called the Water Prison. He’d assumed it was because they used water drip torture on the prisoners.

He tries to see past the rushing curtains of water as they pass them, to try and spot the prisoners within, but it’s impossible. Anything or nothing could be inside those cells, and he’d never know.

They walk, and Gongyi Xiao gives no more warnings or makes any more comments about their surroundings. The only thing Luo Binghe hears is rushing water, and their own echoing

footsteps. The light flickers and dances inconsistently, and the air feels cold and damp in his lungs. Something about it feels strange and out of place as well, in a way that niggles gratingly at the back of his mind, the reason for the feeling of wrongness just at the tip of his tongue. He only realizes what it is once they pass another set of cultivators apparently on patrol, their golden robes catching the flickering torchlight.

For the first time since Luo Binghe arrived here, he's not surrounded by gold. There's not a single speck of it anywhere to be seen. After spending so long with decorative gold tracing along every gilded edge around him, its sudden absence feels strange and unnatural.

Luo Binghe is just about to make some sort of comment about it, to try and break the silence between him and Gongyi Xiao - who is walking with stiff shoulders and his gaze trained stubbornly ahead of him - when a horrible scream suddenly splits the air. They both stop in their tracks, Luo Binghe's hand flying automatically to his sword hilt.

"Is there--" Luo Binghe starts, and then there's another scream - and he realizes where it's coming from. One of the cells to the left side wall, the scream just slightly muffled behind the curtain of running water.

"Excuse me," Gongyi Xiao says curtly. "Just give me a moment."

And then he's running ahead towards the cell the screaming is coming from, taking the golden medallion around his neck off as he goes. The way he isn't going for his sword and how he doesn't seem surprised or confused cements Luo Binghe's understanding of the situation: this isn't an emergency. This isn't some sort of escape attempt, or anything like that. This is business as usual.

As soon as Gongyi Xiao reaches the cell, he slams the golden medallion into some sort of indent in the wall to the side of the water curtain. All at once, the water stops running, exposing the inside of the cell to the world.

There's a single woman inside of it, presumably a prisoner. She's wearing a simple white robe, and her dark, lank hair has been unceremoniously chopped short to jaw length. There are two Huan Hua Palace cultivators in the cell with her, both of them older than Gongyi Xiao and Luo Binghe, making the small cell very cramped.

The woman is lying on the floor, her hands tied together with Immortal Binding Cable, and one of the cultivators is holding her in place, his hands on her jaw and temple, arms around her. The other cultivator is standing over her, holding a tool in her hand.

There are two teeth on the floor, trailing fleshy roots. Blood is pouring from the woman's mouth, staining her white robes red. The male cultivator is prying her mouth open with bruising force as she struggles frantically in his grip, kicking wildly at nothing and making raw, animalistic noises of pain and panic, eyes wide and white with terror.

"Stop," Gongyi Xiao says, harsh and severe as Luo Binghe has never seen him before.

The two cultivators turn to see who has interrupted them, and Gongyi Xiao steps more fully into the cell, crowding it even more.

“You--” the female cultivator says, and then stops once Gongyi Xiao holds out his golden medallion. Showing them who exactly he is.

“Let go of her,” he says, looking down at the male cultivator. Then, to the female cultivator, “Give me that.”

“This is a scheduled interrogation,” the male cultivator says after a moment. He hasn’t let go of the woman, who has stopped frantically struggling but is watching Gongyi Xiao and Luo Binghe with the wild eyes of a frozen prey animal, waiting to see whether they’ll pounce on her as well or not. “We’re meant to get her to share the names of her accomplices--”

“I am your Head Disciple, and you will listen to me when I give you an order,” Gongyi Xiao says, his voice brooking no argument. “I didn’t ask you for an explanation; I told you to let go of her. If you continue to disobey me, then I will have to have you disciplined. Do you understand me?”

Luo Binghe has never seen Gongyi Xiao *threaten* someone before.

The male cultivator hesitates for another moment, but then lets go of the woman. She immediately scrambles away from him, with her bleeding mouth and bound hands, heading straight for the corner furthest away from everyone else. She doesn’t even try to make for the entrance.

“We weren’t doing anything wrong,” the female cultivator says, more stubborn than her partner. “Only our jobs. This woman has killed *children--”*

“I don’t care,” Gongyi Xiao snaps, looking coldly furious. “What is your name?”

“She was a *highwayman.* She killed and stole. She doesn’t need to be rescued.”

Gongyi Xiao looks towards the male cultivator, who is slowly rising up to his feet. “What’s her name?”

“Dong Shu,” the male cultivator promptly answers.

“Dai-shidi,” the female cultivator hisses indignantly.

“Dong Shu,” Gongyi Xiao repeats, in the tones of a man committing something to memory. “Hand that over.”

The female cultivator grits her teeth, but hands the tool over. Something to pry and yank with.

“This tool is property of the prison,” the female cultivator says. “I’m supposed to return it at the end of my shift.”

“You will just have to explain to them that the Head Disciple took it from you, then,” Gongyi Xiao says. “I’ll corroborate your claims. Now go.”

“We’re supposed to get the names--”

"Leave," Gongyi Xiao says, clutching that bloody tool in his hands with white knuckles. "That is an order."

The cultivators leave. Luo Binghe stands out of their way, silent and observing. As soon as they're gone, Gongyi Xiao casts the tool into the gutter like it's something disgusting. It floats on top of the water running in it like a feather, before sizzling away to nothing. He turns towards the woman, who's cowering and trembling violently in the corner of her cell.

"... I'm very sorry," Gongyi Xiao says, the sharp ice melting away from his voice, from every rigid line in his body. It leaves him looking a little raw and exposed, something sick and tired in his expression. He takes a step towards the woman, and she tenses. He stops. Crouching down, he removes a handkerchief from his robes, and tosses it towards her. It flutters to the ground a little short of the mark. "Here. Shove that into your mouth, press it into your gums to stem the bleeding."

She stares down at the handkerchief like it's a trap, and Gongyi Xiao doesn't move. Abruptly, she awkwardly snatches for it with her bound together arms, and does just as he said, shoving into her mouth. There's so much blood staining the front of her robes now.

"I'm sorry," Gongyi Xiao says again, and there's something helpless about it. "... I'll leave you be."

With that, he turns around and walks back out of the cell. Using his medallion again, he makes the sheet of running water come falling down again, obscuring the woman and her ripped out teeth still lying on the floor.

That… was interesting.

Gongyi Xiao glances at him, his face shuttered back into something blank and impenetrable, and he sweeps past him further down the hall as if this really were just a brief interlude in their tour. Luo Binghe follows him, and thinks of what to say.

"... Are you fine?" he eventually settles on.

"Am I fine?" Gongyi Xiao asks, like that was the last thing in the world he'd been expecting to hear. "Yes, Luo-shidi, I'm well. I'm not the one being tortured."

His voice takes a bitter, disdainful twist at the end there, emotion leaking out past the walls he's put up. He must still be badly affected by that scene, to reveal so much. He normally shows nothing at all.

Like a tiger scenting blood, Luo Binghe instinctively moves to press down on the bruise, to pry at the edges of that weakness.

"Did you know her?" Luo Binghe asks.

"No," Gongyi Xiao answers. And then, as if slipping out of his mouth without his permission: "Do I have to? Do I need to know her to care that she's being tortured?"

"You just seemed so upset," Luo Binghe says. "It seemed personal."

“Well, it isn’t,” Gongyi Xiao says. His fury is a sharp thing that turns his voice clipped and curt. “It’s abhorrent all on its own.”

“They said that she killed children,” Luo Binghe points out. “You don’t care about that? Doesn’t that sort of person deserve whatever happens to them?”

“Did she kill children?” Gongyi Xiao asks him. “You say it like it’s a fact, but what evidence do you have? Just some stranger’s say-so. It could have been a lie so that they could save face in front of us. Perhaps she was framed for someone else’s crimes. Maybe there was a misunderstanding. Torturers are told all sorts of awful things about their victims, you know, just to make sure that they won’t hesitate or go easy on them. So they can justify all the pain they give them. Are they grasping for the slightest scrap of evidence to vilify her in their eyes? Have *they* been lied to about her crimes?”

“So you’re afraid that she might be innocent,” Luo Binghe surmises.

“No, that’s not--” Gongyi Xiao swipes a dismissive hand through the air, cutting himself off. “She very well *could* have killed children. That sort of thing happens. But so what?”

“So what?” Luo Binghe repeats, raising his eyebrows.

“That-- that’s not what I meant. What I mean is… whether she’s a killer or not, that doesn’t mean that it’s acceptable to *do* something like that to another human being. It just isn’t acceptable. It *shouldn’t* be.”

“Even if she might be willing to do the same to someone else?”

“Even if.”

“But what if it saves lives? They were trying to get the names of her accomplices out of her. Does that not justify it?”

Gongyi Xiao makes a furious, disdainful noise that startlingly reminds Luo Binghe of a disgusted cat.

“Torture doesn’t even *work!”* he snaps. “Did you know that? The people down here - they teach you how to torture people as if it is an *art,* like it’s a subject worthy of study, as if it’s no different than any other skill. They might as well be cruel children wielding hammers, for all they’re accomplishing! They’d get the same results! A person who is in great enough pain will say *anything* to make it stop, whether it’s the truth or not. What if they don’t know the truth to tell it? What do they do then, once someone’s pulling out their fingernails in pursuit of an answer that they can’t give? They come up with one. *I don’t know* isn’t an accepted answer, even when it’s true.

“This is supposedly one of the greatest and most righteous sects of the cultivation world, and yet we have a massive organization and infrastructure dedicated to *pointless sadism.* What evidence do we have that torture actually works? Nothing, because *it doesn’t.* We do it because we *feel like* it should work. It *feels* logical to us that we should be able to torture a person into surrendering the truth, and so we continue on despite the complete and continual

lack of any actual results. We're basing our ideas on how people work off what we feel is right and logical instead of *actual observed reality!* If the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result each time, then what the hell do you call *this?*

"Generations of pain festering underneath our palace, and to what end? A fearsome reputation? A convenient threat? How is that *righteous?* What right do we have to our sense of superiority if we behave worse than demons?! Other sects don't do this! Not on this scale! Why does *our* sect have to be like this? Torture! Doesn't! Work! It's sheer *idiocy* to continue insisting that it does! To ask the question whether or not it's worth it is a fallacy to begin with! It's not *doing* anything! It's pain for the sake of pain!"

By the time Gongyi Xiao finishes ranting, he's breathing heavily, his face flushed with rage. His hands, which he'd been gesturing with as he talked, drop to his sides. Luo Binghe is…

He's stunned.

Gongyi Xiao seems to collect himself, stiffening and clearing his throat. Luo Binghe hurries to intervene before he completely packs himself away. He wants to see more of this side of him.

"They'll just go back to torturing her later," he says. "The woman. They'll go back to her cell later, when you're not here. Right?"

Gongyi Xiao's expression darkens. "And then she'll stick to the lies she's no doubt already given them. Maybe she's even told them the truth, and they'll only persuade her to change her answer in the hope of appeasing them. Maybe she never knew her accomplices' names at all. Maybe she didn't even have accomplices."

"Why did you intervene then?" Luo Binghe asks. "You've only delayed the inevitable."

"If I had asked her whether she wanted me to stop them or not, even though they'd just come back later, what do you think she'd say?" Gongyi Xiao asks. "... Perhaps I'm assuming too much. Maybe she really would have preferred to just get it over with then and there. I might have done the wrong thing."

That's why he did it? Just that? He'll get in trouble for this. Gongyi Xiao may be the Head Disciple, but that doesn't mean he won't be disciplined for giving faulty orders, interfering with others' work with no justification. Those two cultivators broke no rules, and were clearly only doing their duties. Officially, they are not the ones in the wrong. Gongyi Xiao is - and that's a problem, with how badly things have been going for him lately. Yet another black mark against him, when he already has so many. He must have known this. He must have known that he'll be punished for this, and that he'll only have won the woman a temporary respite in exchange.

And yet he still did it. He hadn't even hesitated.

"I have enough authority to tell someone to beat it, but not to meaningfully *end* anything," Gongyi Xiao says, something bitter simmering underneath his words. "I don't get to rewrite

the rules. Sometimes, being Head Disciple feels more like a taunt than anything else. I have just enough power to feel how little I really have."

This is why he'd been so silent before. So tense. Luo Binghe had thought that it might be because Gongyi Xiao suspected something of him, but it wasn't that. He can see it now, in how exactingly deliberate and stilted Gongyi Xiao is in all his movements here. He hates this place. He hates being in it, he hates seeing it - he hates that it *exists*.

The Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace hating such an essential part of it as the Water Prison so passionately… It's borderline blasphemy, isn't it? Many people here would want to see him kneel in contrition and whipped if they heard him say such disrespectful things. It's completely and utterly inappropriate and unfitting. A Head Disciple should be nothing but proud of his own sect.

It feels like the most genuine piece of him that Luo Binghe has gotten to see yet. He has seen him calm, he has seen him kind, he has seen him mature and responsible. This is the first time he has seen him properly *angry,* and it's almost intoxicating how satisfying it is to finally, finally find the thing that makes Gongyi Xiao furious. You only get angry about the things you truly *care* for.

And *this* is what makes him snap, in the end. Not being blamed for things that aren't his fault, not having people who have fawned over him for years suddenly turn their backs on him. It's this.

"Perhaps you can change things for good," Luo Binghe hears himself saying, "when you become Sect Leader."

Gongyi Xiao looks at him, and Luo Binghe thinks about his dream.

It's mine now. All of it. And there's just none left over for you, so I think it would be for the best if you just left.

Gongyi Xiao smiles - and just like that, it's over. That raw and sincere emotion, that open genuineness. It gets wiped away like chalk dust, and there's nothing left behind but the Golden Head Disciple. Luo Binghe, absurdly, feels robbed.

"Oh, don't say that, Luo-shidi," Gongyi Xiao says pleasantly. "I'm sure that the Old Palace Master has a good couple more centuries left in him."

You'll never let me become Sect Leader, he doesn't say, even though they both know it. Just like that, they're back to being two actors having a hollow conversation, dutifully reading out their sides of the script in turns. Why had Luo Binghe said that? He'd reminded Gongyi Xiao of his position, of the direction things are headed. Luo Binghe had been *learning* things about him, and now the moment has passed.

Perhaps he'd been trying to provoke him; to see if he could spark that anger towards something closer to home. Clearly, he's failed.

Luo Binghe has never enjoyed failure.

“You’ve been very helpful today,” Luo Binghe says. “But I think I’ve seen enough of the Water Prison for now; we can head back up if you like.”

Gongyi Xiao, he has found, has a habit of retreating from Luo Binghe every time their interactions begin to approach anything genuine. Cornering him into this task had been a deliberate tactic to cut off that avenue from him, to trap him inside a duty that he couldn’t just abandon at any moment with some excuse. Luo Binghe had wanted to poke and prod at him, to test and probe. To see if he could pry something *real* out of him in the waking realm.

He’s accomplished that now. He can already tell from that locked vault smile that Gongyi Xiao won’t be letting himself make the same mistake twice today. A brief lapse, nothing more. There’s no more point to this; he might as well cut things off here.

“If you’re sure,” Gongyi Xiao says, and he turns his back on the Water Prison just a hair too quickly. As if every moment spent down here is a deliberate effort for him, a growing strain, like holding his breath. As if he can barely control his relief at getting to *leave.*

“I am,” Luo Binghe assures him, following. “I’ve learned many things.”

“I’m glad,” Gongyi Xiao recites his line dutifully. “You can ask me for help at any time.”

And so together they leave the festering, dark tumor hidden underneath the golden facade of Huan Hua Palace, making their way back up to the pretty and clean surface where they can breathe freely and no one screams. It is as different as night and day, and it is difficult to keep that cold dungeon in mind amongst all the lush greenery and shining wealth surrounding them.

But the Water Prison stays buried underneath their feet regardless, present for each and every step. It is what the palace is built upon, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Torture, an unnamed character gets their teeth pulled out of their mouth.

I like to HC that HHP brings disciples very gradually into the whole Torture Thing, so that it's very normalized to them by the time they get to the hardcore stuff. Our SY!GYX, unfortunately, got dumped into the deepend all at once because OG!GYX had after all already gone through this process, and it was a pretty traumatizing experience. Not that he'd ever admit to being traumatized.

The Immortal Alliance Conference

Chapter Summary

Gongyi Xiao, young and clad in white, leaps out of the way of an attack from a Fire Spewing Lizard. He rolls on the ground, smoothly gets back up onto his feet, and sprints to close the distance between him and the monster before its fuel sacs have refilled enough for another attack. Smoke, blood, and dirt all streak the once pure white of his robes, his face, his hair. It only makes him look brave and determined.

“Ah,” says Gongyi Xiao, older and clad in gold, watching and shaking his head in disapproval. “What an amateur mistake.”

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 5.6k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“Ah,” says Gongyi Xiao, older and clad in gold, watching and shaking his head in disapproval. “What an amateur mistake.”

“How so?” Luo Binghe asks.

Gongyi Xiao blinks and looks next to him, looking surprised to see Luo Binghe there. It’s a mild sort of surprise, not as if it’s impossible for Luo Binghe to be here, but only as if Gongyi Xiao had expected him to be somewhere else at the moment. Luo Binghe had intended to remain a silent observer for this dream, so he wouldn’t interrupt or distract as Gongyi Xiao’s memories of the Immortal Alliance Conference unfolded naturally. However, the dream has hit a snag, looping around itself repetitively, not moving forward or backwards. It needs a little push to continue, so here he is.

Gongyi Xiao gestures towards the white robed version of himself. The younger Gongyi Xiao failed to reach the Fire Spewing Lizard before it was able to launch another fire blast at him, so now he’s on his sword, trying to fly upwards out of range as the flames chase him.

“He thinks that getting close enough to the Fire Spewing Lizard is going to let him kill it swiftly, but it doesn’t work like that,” he says. “They have magma flowing through their veins instead of blood; if he tries to cut it with his sword then all that will happen is that the blade will melt. He should just focus on trying to take it down with sword glares from a distance.”

He thinks, not *I thought.*

This isn’t what Luo Binghe had been envisioning, when he’d coaxed the memories of this night to the surface of Gongyi Xiao’s sleeping mind. It would’ve been much more natural for Gongyi Xiao to set himself in the role and place of his past self, and yet instead he’s been following himself at a distance, an invisible ghost to a reenactment of his own memories, idly making comments as he spectates. He keeps criticizing his past self’s handling of various monsters, remarking on how he’s ignoring obvious weak points or not using the most optimal strategies. The past Gongyi Xiao’s fighting form is excellent, but it’s true: he isn’t fighting like he’s studied or had personal experience combating any of these monsters.

Luo Binghe remembers Qin Wanrong once telling him that Gongyi Xiao has a great interest in monsters and various demonic creatures. Apparently, that was something that only started *after* the Immortal Alliance Conference. It isn’t, Luo Binghe supposes, the strangest way someone might react to an experience like this. He certainly won’t be making the same mistake twice.

“But he did still manage to kill it in the end,” Luo Binghe says, going along with Gongyi Xiao’s phrasing. That’s the trick with dreams, to work *with* them. If you contradict them too much, plant yourself like a stubborn rock against the stream, or make any too startling changes then you’ll risk the dreamer simply waking up. He could get away with more if this were *his* dream, but it isn’t. He’s visiting Gongyi Xiao’s, and so he must be a subtle and unobtrusive guest.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Gongyi Xiao reluctantly grants, as if he’d rather continue to gripe and nitpick. “I’m being unfair; he’s doing a perfectly fine job, really. It could just be a little more efficient if he understood *what* he’s fighting.”

The white robed Gongyi Xiao stops flying, letting himself fall freely down to earth as his blade glows brighter and brighter as he charges a sword glare. Right as the Fire Spewing Lizard’s ready to unleash another blast - its charcoal scales glowing hot and red in preparation - Gongyi Xiao unleashes the sword glare. The golden glow tears out of his blade hard enough to halt his momentum for just a moment, and it scorches the monster and the swathe of ground it stands on with a righteous vengeance. All that’s left is a smoldering smear in the dirt. Gongyi Xiao catches himself on his sword, and swoops away from an impact with the ground with only inches to spare.

“See, like that,” Gongyi Xiao says. “He could have just done that from the *start* if he already understood that was the best tactic.”

“It’s a hectic night,” Luo Binghe says. “It’s dark, and parts of the environment are on fire. There are monsters running all over, and panicked disciples as well. It’s not too strange if he’s disoriented and not making the most efficient decisions.”

“Yes, yes,” Gongyi Xiao says. “Yes, I suppose so. He’s doing his best. It’s just frustrating to see someone do something in a way that you *know* is wrong, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Luo Binghe agrees.

And then it happens again. The younger Gongyi Xiao, singed and panting for breath, whirls around towards a rustling in the bushes, sword at the ready. There’s a deep growl, and then--everything goes dark. As if all the flames, the stars, and the moon have been extinguished all at once, leaving behind nothing but pitch blackness.

But then it all comes back a second later, as if it were only a blink, and there Jue Di Gorge is. There’s Gongyi Xiao in his white robes, his sword unsheathed as he sprints past the trees… only to find a young, frightened disciple being attacked by a Fire Spewing Lizard.

“Run!” Gongyi Xiao snaps at the disciple. “I’ll take it!”

The disciple escapes desperately, and Luo Binghe watches the same fight start its fourth loop in a row. The reason for his intervention.

It had been unexpectedly difficult to coax these memories up from the depths of Gongyi Xiao’s mind and up to the surface where he could dream about them. There hadn’t just been silt or cobwebs or dust on them, they had been *buried.* It had taken careful time and effort to unearth them, and now that they’re here he can see that they’re clearly damaged.

Memories are often hazy, disjointed things. People remember far less than they think they do, only hanging onto the most relevant pieces of any event, and inventing or guessing to fill in the blanks. But this is more than that. It’s like a play with half the pages torn out of the script, and instead of coming up with something logical or vaguely recognizable to cover over the gaps it just *skips* right past them. It’s disorienting and tangled, and now the dream is outright repeating itself, like someone stuck walking in circles in a maze.

That, combined with the way Gongyi Xiao is looking at his past self instead of taking his role, making comments as if he’s only watching a performance for his own entertainment, makes Luo Binghe think of disassociation, repression, distancing. Gongyi Xiao does not dream about this night. He does not speak about it. He does not *think* about it.

And so, this is really the only option Luo Binghe has to learn anything more about what Gongyi Xiao may or may not have witnessed at the Immortal Alliance Conference. To make him relive it, and watch on from the shadows as things play out as they once did.

At least, that had been the plan. And then the dream got stuck in a loop.

“He’s very heroic, for such a young man,” Luo Binghe says.

So now he’s here to try and *unstick* it.

Gongyi Xiao looks at him, as mildly startled to see him as he had been the first time. Memory can become slippery in dreams, difficult to keep a hold on. He’s acting as if this is his first time seeing this fight, not the fourth.

And then he says: “Oh, it’s Binghe.”

Luo Binghe very deliberately doesn’t react to that, but it takes all of his concentration for a moment. Gongyi Xiao has only ever called him ‘Luo-shidi’ in waking life. To hear himself addressed so familiarly is-- startling. He hadn’t been expecting it.

He gestures towards the fighting Gongyi Xiao, and says, “It’s admirable.”

Gongyi Xiao looks back towards the fight. “Yes, I suppose so. He has to be, after all.”

“Does he?” Luo Binghe asks, attention sharpening.

“Of course,” Gongyi Xiao says. “The Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace can’t be *pathetic.”*

There’s something there. Luo Binghe feels like he’s just caught sight of the tail of a creature, just the merest glimpse before losing track of it.

“One couldn’t *become* the Head Disciple while being pathetic in the first place, could they?” Luo Binghe asks.

“Right,” Gongyi Xiao says. “Except for-- well.”

“Except?”

“I’m not *pathetic,”* Gongyi Xiao says, defending himself against an accusation that hasn’t been made. “I’m not that bad.”

Luo Binghe stares. For some reason, the first thought that comes to mind is *who has been calling you pathetic?*

“You aren’t,” he agrees instead.

“Just because I didn’t really *earn* my promotion,” Gongyi Xiao continues, “doesn’t mean that-- I do a perfectly fine job. I help resolve disputes, I look out for the kids, I assist anyone who’s lagging behind.”

“Of course,” Luo Binghe says. Didn’t earn?

“I’m careful on missions,” Gongyi Xiao continues, defensive. “I don’t unnecessarily risk anyone under my command.”

“That’s very good, Gongyi-shixiong.”

“I’m a decent swordsman. A cut above the rest of the cannon fodder, anyway. And I never disgrace Huan Hua with my conduct! At least--” His expression twists for only a moment. “-- not usually.”

His recent shift in fortunes, he means. Dozens of different unfortunate incidents, small and large, and all Luo Binghe’s own doing.

“I may not be who everyone thinks I am,” Gongyi Xiao goes on. “But it’s a good act, isn’t it?”

“An act,” Luo Binghe repeats.

“Ah, you know,” Gongyi Xiao says, making a vague hand gesture through the air as if in demonstration. “Gongyi Xiao, the Golden Head Disciple. Perfect and filial, mild mannered and polite. I do a good job of pretending to be who everyone *wants* me to be, right? So even though it’s all fake, that doesn’t mean that I’m a terrible Head Disciple. I may not have earned the position in the first place, but I’ve done alright with it. There are plenty of people who would’ve done a whole lot worse!”

All at once, Luo Binghe remembers something else he heard after he’d invaded Gongyi Xiao’s dreams for the first time. A taunt from that other Luo Binghe, victorious and arrogant with it, twisting the knife in as he stole Gongyi Xiao’s entire life from him.

You never really deserved this position, this place.

Luo Binghe had hardly paid attention to it. There had been so much else that had been significantly more distracting, more shocking. The idea that Gongyi Xiao thinks that he doesn’t deserve to have anything that he owns had just… slipped past him.

“You put on an act,” Luo Binghe says slowly, “because you don’t feel like someone like you should be the Head Disciple. You act like someone you think *would* deserve it.”

Luo Binghe has been noticing a difference in behavior between Gongyi Xiao’s waking and dreaming selves. He’d put it down to nothing more than a lack of filter, of self consciousness swept away. Gongyi Xiao always holds himself very deliberately whenever speaking with Luo Binghe. However, it seems like it might go even deeper than that.

“Someone like *me* would hardly be given such a position of responsibility,” Gongyi Xiao says, like it should be obvious. “I have to keep lying to keep it at all. It’s important that no one finds out about the true, flawed me.”

“Like what?” Luo Binghe asks.

“Hm?”

“What kind of flaws do you have?” Luo Binghe asks, and there’s a *hunger* to the question. He wants to know. He wants to know every little secret that Gongyi Xiao has, all the hidden things he dares not let other people see for fear of how they might judge him. He wants to know all the foulest, ugliest parts of him. *What’s the catch? Where is it, what’s* wrong *with you? There must be something.*

Gongyi Xiao thinks for a moment, and then answers: “I’m lazy.”

Luo Binghe… blinks.

“You’re lazy,” he repeats.

“I’ve never been very ambitious,” Gongyi Xiao admits sheepishly. “I know I should probably have some grand ambition, like becoming the world’s greatest cultivator or unsealing the demon emperor just so I can defeat him myself - but I don’t really see the point. Fame and glory seem like more trouble than they’re worth. I’d rather just comfortably idle the rest of my life away, to be honest.”

“Ah,” Luo Binghe says, not knowing how to even begin processing that.

“And I’m boring too,” Gongyi Xiao confesses. “I’m not an exciting person at all. Seeing interesting places and monsters is very fun on occasion, but my idea of a perfect day is to just get to stay at home and read a good book and eat my favorite foods.”

He says this like he’s revealing something terribly disappointing about himself.

“I see,” Luo Binghe says blankly.

“And I don’t actually know what I’m *doing,”* Gongyi Xiao continues. “I act like I always do, but to be honest a lot of the time I’m just guessing, or making things up as I go and hoping for the best! I make mistakes, too. I’ve had plans that have gotten completely out of hand, and I just acted like that actually *was* the plan all along, or I fumble my way through it by the skin of my teeth.”

Gongyi Xiao says this all as if he’s confessing to a crime. Like Luo Binghe will look at him with incredulity and disgust, and cry *an imposter! Banish him at once!*

He has to bite his tongue to stop himself from asking if *that’s it.* If that’s really his horrible secret, those are the shameful flaws that decree that he is undeserving and unworthy of his position, his status. Luo Binghe had been bracing himself for something wretched. He had been waiting for something ugly, dark, and foul, something that would finally make Gongyi Xiao make *sense.* Surely there would have to be something truly awful at the core of him, to explain all the rest of him. Some hidden splinter of cruelty, a secret streak of sadism.

Instead, it’s this. He is, by his own opinion and self assessment, lazy and unambitious. Sometimes, he feels as if he doesn’t have everything under control. *That* is it. That’s the thing that is wrong with Gongyi Xiao.

Luo Binghe feels the strange urge to *scream.* Distantly, he suppresses it.

“Even if you do feel like that,” Luo Binghe says, and his voice is as deliberately steady and even as his swordhand, “that doesn’t change the fact that you *are* Head Disciple. Doesn’t *being* inherently prove that you *are* worthy of the position? Other people certainly seem to think so.”

“They just don’t know any better, that’s all,” Gongyi Xiao says dismissively. “I’ve fooled them. I didn’t really earn it myself.”

As if successfully fooling people into handing over the position doesn’t count as earning it. As if winning people over, being likable and charismatic, upholding an admirable appearance, and being a good liar aren’t *skills.*

Luo Binghe has had to claw and struggle for scraps his entire life, has never had anything he didn't bleed or make someone else bleed for. He lies and manipulates like he breathes. Perhaps he has stolen everything he owns, perhaps people would spit upon him as undeserving if they only truly knew him and all the things that he's done to get where he is today - not just rising, but alive at all.

But that does not change that he has still *earned it.* Every last little drop of it. Snatching something out of someone's resisting hands is a competition, and the winner gets to keep the prize. Just because others - haughty and spoiled enough to have never been left with no other option than to take instead of be given, to be allowed the opportunity to fight *honorably* - would look down on him for it does not mean that he has not fought and bled for it.

Gongyi Xiao, apparently, doesn't feel the same way. He's talking about himself, not Luo Binghe, so he doesn't know why this makes him so *angry* to think about. He tries to distract himself before the weight of his own rage can start to put cracks on this dream, as wispy and fragile as it already is.

"Regardless of whether or not you earned it in the first place," Luo Binghe says forcefully, "you're clearly doing good with it now that you *do* have it."

Gongyi Xiao looks at him, and he smiles. It's a real smile. Luo Binghe can tell, because it's a little sad at the edges.

"Binghe will do even better," he says simply, and there's a true thread of admiration in the words. "There's no competing with you."

Luo Binghe goes still.

"The only way I could ever become Head Disciple is thanks to the incredible circumstances I find myself in," Gongyi Xiao goes on. "But you could become Head Disciple in a thousand different ways, no matter what situation you might find yourself in. You always win in the end."

He says this as if it's a simple law of reality, something unyielding and fundamental.

Luo Binghe opens his mouth to - what, argue? But there's nothing that he can disagree with. That's the ugly truth of it, really: Gongyi Xiao is *right.* He's good with the disciples, is intelligent and kind, is deft and skilled with a blade, and just fits *well* as the Head Disciple. And none of it matters. He was never chosen for his accomplishments. They were, at best, an *excuse* to pick him.

In the end, he was chosen for nothing more than his face. His resemblance to a dead woman, long gone but still beloved. He could have been so much more mediocre or outright incompetent, and he still would have almost certainly been picked. He would've had to be truly abysmal for the Old Palace Master not to have selected him as Su Xiyan's replacement.

He had never before considered the idea that Gongyi Xiao might be *aware* of this.

There is the brightness of a golden spiritual flare, lighting up the dark and gloomy light for a split second like the sun has come down to earth. Luo Binghe turns to see the younger Gongyi Xiao slay the Fire Spewing Lizard, his blade just barely skimming the grass as he flies, his hair streaming behind him like a banner.

“He should have just done that to begin with,” the Gongyi Xiao next to him says.

The cycle is going to begin again soon. Suddenly, Luo Binghe can’t *stand* the idea. He just wants to get this over with already.

“Look,” he says, abrupt and impatient. “Do you see it, past those trees? It’s an Abyssal Tear.”

“It’s *here?”* Gongyi Xiao asks, stunned, looking to find it - and just like that, it *is* there. Created out of pure expectation, it can be glimpsed in pieces behind obstructing trees. A darkness deeper than the night around it, seemingly swallowing up all light that touches it: a *void* in the earth. An open, waiting maw.

“There’s some people standing next to it,” Luo Binghe rasps. “A Peak Lord and a boy.”

The older Gongyi Xiao moves forwards through the trees to try and find a viewpoint that lets him see the whole of it. The younger Gongyi Xiao has quietly disappeared.

“I see them,” Gongyi Xiao breathes.

Luo Binghe cannot. He’s standing too far back. He needs to move forward, so he can see what it is that Gongyi Xiao saw that night.

“Oh,” Gongyi Xiao says. “Oh, he’s just a *kid.”*

Luo Binghe does not move forwards.

“The Peak Lord has his sword out,” he hears himself say. Xiu Ya. He could describe the blade if necessary. How long and tapering it was, how sharp and elegant, its edge cold and cruel. The distant firelight had danced across the metal with no warmth. “The boy doesn’t.”

Luo Binghe does not need to move forward. As Gongyi Xiao watches, he forgets about everything else but the scene in front of him - and so it all begins to disintegrate, the edges of the dream shrinking and eroding to hug at his heels. Everything twists and warps to put the main act on center stage, the moonlight itself spilling down to highlight nothing else but those two figures. It’s impossible *not* to see them.

There is a figure meant to look like Shen Qingqiu. It is tall, cold, and severe. The details are wrong - the exact shape of the cheekbones, chin, eyes - but that could all be explained by distance and unreliable lighting. All the broad strokes are there.

There is a figure meant to be Luo Binghe. Younger, in white robes. The moonlight halos it, and it looks up at its shizun with urgent, beseeching eyes. Its eyes are red, and there’s a vague smudge of an uncertain huadian on its forehead.

Luo Binghe thinks: *It isn't kneeling.*

Luo Binghe says, "They're talking."

"Shizun, I have done no wrong," the Luo Binghe construct pleads. "I have not been disloyal to the sect; I have not conspired with demons; I did not wish for this attack to happen. I *promise* you."

It speaks the words clearly and strongly, only a thread of emotion in its voice to give it an earnest conviction. It does not choke on its own tears and terror, its voice does not hitch or crack.

"The word of a demon mongrel has no worth," the Shen Qingqiu construct speaks harshly, its features twisted up with hatred. "Why should I trust a creature that has infiltrated my peak for who knows what purpose? There is no doubt that there can only be malice in your heart."

"I came to your peak because you *chose* me, Shizun," the Luo Binghe construct reasons. It sounds passionate and emotional but still, ultimately, rational. As if this is a debate that it can win, the other party swayed and convinced by logic and reason. It's a moving performance. "I only ever wanted to join this sect so I could survive."

"A foolish mistake," the Shen Qingqiu construct says. It reaches out to grab the Luo Binghe construct--

--and he dodges, moving out of the way of his hand.

"You're not being *fair,"* Luo Binghe says, fury in his voice.

"Do you deserve fairness? Is that a privilege you think you're entitled to?" Shen Qingqiu asks acridly.

"I deserve *some!* Shizun has not spared me a single drop of it, not since I came--"

"So the scales must be balanced, is that it? Tell me, what is the equation? How much cruelty must you endure for a single cup of kindness? Because that is how it is done, apparently. You must think yourself worldly and jaded, to have accepted that you must pay heavily in suffering for the prize of mercy."

"It would cost you *nothing* to--"

"You *spoiled, foolish child.* The fates do not keep a *ledger* of the wrongs wrought upon you, to be made up at some later date. Not even if the debts are skewed and grudging, crumbs given in exchange for feasts of pain. That you continue to insist on fairness at all shows that you have not learned a single thing on my peak."

Shen Qingqiu grabs for Luo Binghe again. Luo Binghe dives down and grasps his sword from the grass, and he brandishes it between them with a cry of anger.

"Why me?!" Luo Binghe demands. "Why do you choose to torment me, when I have never done a thing to you? You think *me* spoiled? I've *starved!* I've begged and I've run and I've

lost and been beaten. What of Ming Fan, with his family's tea fields and courtyards and dozens of servants? What of *anyone else* on this mountain?"

"You think I can't see you," Shen Qingqiu says. "You think I can't tell. Luo Binghe, you are to the very heart of you - to your core, to your marrow - a rotten creature. You were born with a wicked soul. There is nothing you will ever be able to do to change this. You were foul and vile from your very first day, and you will die thus. Isn't it righteous to punish evil?"

"Yes," Luo Binghe says, "it is."

Luo Binghe runs Shen Qingqiu through on his sword.

He shouldn't be able to. Shen Qingqiu is a Peak Lord, and Luo Binghe is only a boy. And yet he does, Xin Mo piercing his stomach and then sliding out of his back, the blade slick and red with blood. Shen Qingqiu snarls at him, his teeth bloody, all bitterness and hatred even with a sword speared through him. It looks like a fatal wound.

Luo Binghe pushes the man off his sword, using the motion to shove him towards that dark, yawning open gash in the earth that leads into the hellish depths of the Endless Abyss. Shen Qingqiu stumbles, crumples - falls. The gash swallows him whole without a sound.

Yes, Luo Binghe thinks. *That's how it should have happened.*

That's when he realizes what's gone wrong. He is no longer Luo Binghe, the onlooker. He is Luo Binghe, the boy standing at the edge of the Abyss. He had let himself be sucked into the dream, like allowing the currents of a whirlpool to drag him down into the water. He hadn't even noticed it as it happened.

He notices it now. He notices his white knuckle grip on the dream itself, the way it's beginning to strain and crack underneath the crushing force of his control. There is nothing subtle, coaxing, or careful about it in the slightest. It is desperate; it is *amateurish.*

Luo Binghe forces himself to let go. The dream pops and creaks like settling ice as he releases it, but it does not shatter. It holds.

He's covered in Shen Qingqiu's blood. Xiu Ya lies abandoned on the ground, its owner gone and forsaken. Luo Binghe isn't even holding the right sword; he'd had Zheng Yang at this age, not Xin Mo. It doesn't make any sense.

Gods, how childish, how *crude.* Luo Binghe hasn't made a mistake like this in many years. He let himself sink into the dream and he took it for himself, let his own expectations and regrets shape it. He let the dream run away from him, spinning out of control, away from reenactment and into something else entirely. This was not the *purpose* of this endeavor. He hadn't even noticed when he'd done it; he can't trust a single thing he's seen here. What on earth came over him?

He reaches out to undo it, to go back to the start of the loop again so he can get it *right* this time, stand back and stay uninvolved. He just has to start over--

As soon as he touches the fabric of the dream, he realizes what he's done. It's altered. It's changed, it's *ruined.* This fragile wisp of a pressed down memory that he'd unearthed so carefully, so delicately - he's *stained it.* Luo Binghe has irrevocably tainted the dream with his own thoughts and feelings and expectations, having allowed his own emotions to roar so bright and loud that they've left a crater in the very foundations of the memory.

He can't go back to the start. He can't let the memory play out on its own, can't see what Gongyi Xiao witnessed on that night. It's all so tangled together that he won't be able to tell what came from Gongyi Xiao and what came from him. He's spoiled it.

All over one childish mistake; a simple slip up.

Luo Binghe *roars,* and with a wave of his hand he unleashes a blast that would be impossible in waking life. It tears a gouge through the earth and fells trees because he wills that it is so; he makes it scatter the clouds and kill the flames; the constant sound of distant screaming and combat all goes dead quiet at once, as if in terror of him.

He's about to tear this dream to shreds with his claws, to shatter this failure underneath his heel in a rage - when there's a hand on his shoulder.

It's Gongyi Xiao. He's no longer an onlooker at the edge of the treeline, and has instead crossed the distance between them. The chasm of the Endless Abyss looms right next to him. Luo Binghe could throw him down there too. He could tear *him* to shreds.

If Gongyi Xiao is worried about either of these possibilities then he doesn't show it. His brow is furrowed, as if in a mix of concern and something firmer.

"Binghe," Gongyi Xiao says. "I think someone should have told you this a long time ago, and so you need to listen carefully."

"What," Luo Binghe tries to snap, but his voice comes out rawer than he intends.

Gongyi Xiao takes a deep breath, looks him straight in the eyes, and says: "That dickhead doesn't know what he's talking about."

Luo Binghe, not knowing what to have expected but certainly not *that,* chokes on his own astonishment.

"It's true!" Gongyi Xiao insists. Mockingly, he imitates Shen Qingqiu's voice: *"You think I can't see you.* Motherfucker, see *what?* Your 'wicked heart?' Does he have X-ray vision or something? Where the hell did that ability come from?! No one can tell that someone is no good from a *glance.* He's obviously just making stuff up to justify the feelings he already has about you!"

A noise hiccups out of Luo Binghe's throat; he thinks it might be an incredulous laugh.

"Binghe," he goes on, his voice twisting with earnestness, looking deeply into Luo Binghe's eyes as if he's willing the words to sink deep into him. "All of the things that bastard said about you are wrong. You shouldn't listen to a single thing he has to say, because he's *so*

obviously biased against you. I've never even talked to him myself, and yet there is one thing that is painfully clear about him: Shen Qingqiu is a bitter, unhappy man who's so miserable that he wants everyone around him to be as miserable as he is!"

"You…" Luo Binghe says. His eyes are burning. He doesn't know whether he wants to laugh or cry. "Why did it have to be you?"

Gongyi Xiao looks at him blankly, like he doesn't understand. This man-- this *ridiculous* man who doesn't want money, power, or revenge. Who only wants to live a peaceful and comfortable life, and was instead pushed into taking on a role that he doesn't even think he deserves by the Old Palace Master. There are so many terrible people in the world, so much selfish scum willing to tread on others for their own benefit.

But instead, this is who Luo Binghe gets. This is the person he needs to destroy and depose. This man, who is now trying to *comfort* him, of all things. Of all people.

"Why couldn't anyone else in the world have been Head Disciple?" Luo Binghe asks. "Anyone but you."

"It's not such a bad role," Gongyi Xiao says. "It could have been much worse."

"Why are you doing this?" Luo Binghe asks roughly, and he can't stop himself from grabbing at Gongyi Xiao's arms. "Why are you being so nice to me? You *know* what I'm after. Do you think that I'm going to spare you if you just smile at me? I won't. I'm going to *win,* and I'll take anything I have to in order to do that."

Gongyi Xiao stares at him with wide eyes, looking taken aback by the outburst.

"What," he says, flustered, "I can't smile at you? I don't have permission?"

Luo Binghe makes an inarticulate noise of frustration.

"Why do you even *want* to?!" he demands, his grip tightening--

Too tight--

With a lurching, dizzying feeling, the landscape all around them shatters, breaks apart. Luo Binghe realizes what's happening. The dream is falling to pieces because the sleeping mind it's inhabiting is emerging from the Dream Realm. Gongyi Xiao is waking up.

Even as the dream slips away from him entirely, he doesn't let go of his grip on him. Gongyi Xiao has to vanish beneath his hands himself, leaving Luo Binghe empty handed in the dark void where his sleeping mind had once been. For a long moment he just lets himself drift and fall in the endless void, feeling robbed and abandoned in equal measure.

Then he catches himself on a passing bright spot of a sleeping mind, swinging onto it. Without wasting time he skips to the next, and the next, and the next. He moves closer and closer towards the surface with each jump. Gongyi Xiao is gone; he's done here for the night.

Luo Binghe spun that dream together in the first place to learn more things about Gongyi Xiao, to discover truths. But in the end, he only feels like he’s been left with more questions about the Head Disciple than ever.

Chapter End Notes

This fic now has some more fanart by deisderium!

Plum Wine

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe isn't soft.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 3.3k words long.

Luo Binghe isn't soft. He has long since learned how to not be so. He doesn't any longer think that a smile and earnest hard work is going to win him any favors from anyone. People don't respect that, and they don't appreciate it either. All it does is paint a target on your back, telling others that you're easy to push around.

You win by being ruthless. You win by not holding back. You win by making sure to look after *yourself,* above anyone or anything else. It's all well good to make sure that your allies survive and thrive, to show them the benefits of obedience in conjunction with the steep disadvantages of *disobedience* - but first and foremost, self preservation and benefiting yourself should always be the number one priority.

Gongyi Xiao isn't even an ally. He's a rival, an obstacle, something to be toppled and removed so that Luo Binghe can advance his plans to take over the sect. Becoming Head Disciple is a key and crucial step involved in that. If he thinks that Luo Binghe will hesitate for a single second in stealing his entire life from him just to benefit himself, then he's *sorely* mistaken.

Just to prove this, the very first thing that Luo Binghe does when he wakes up is seek out Hallmaster Hou.

Hallmaster Hou was the cultivator who Gongyi Xiao talked to when getting a room for Luo Binghe. The man who was angry with Cai Yun for having disruptive nightmares in his dorm room, and so Gongyi Xiao metaphorically bent and twisted his arm until he went ahead and gave the young disciple a room of his own as well to deal with the problem. Luo Binghe had carefully taken note of the way the man's face had twisted and gone puce red with rage at the intervention, and he's kept the man in the back of his mind ever since.

Hallmaster Hou. Not a key player in the sect, but not a nobody either. Someone just important enough to get to swing his weight around and make life hell for anyone underneath him, and be too inconvenient to outright replace or get rid of. Just the sort of petty man who

might bitterly stew over any infringement upon the little authority that he has, and stubbornly hold onto any grudges he may have.

As he walks people bow, curtsy, nod, wave to, and otherwise greet him warmly and respectfully as he passes. Luo Binghe acknowledges all of these gestures, with a smile and eye contact if nothing else, and comfortably makes his way through the palace grounds. He's utterly familiar with all the public spaces of the sect by now, and is quickly learning all the hidden ones as well. He is mastering Huan Hua Palace like one might master the sword, so that he'll be able to one day wield it deftly and expertly.

People recognize him as he passes, and he recognizes them in turn. He is becoming more and more well established here with each passing day. He knows exactly which people to stop and discreetly asks if they've seen Hallmaster Hou lately, he just has a message to pass onto him and he'd appreciate having a direction - and he's assisted every single time.

It turns out that Hallmaster Hou is not in an administration building or overseeing one of the dorms he has jurisdiction over, but is instead in his home. Perhaps this means that he isn't to be disturbed, but Luo Binghe won't be swayed. He can work with this.

Hallmaster Hou does not have a room *inside* the palace. Instead, as a mark of distinction, he has his own house. It's built inside one of the gardens, cherry blossoms gently carpeting the winding cobblestone path that cuts through the green grass, the trees sheltering the stately house from the outside world. The garden is not a public one; Luo Binghe can tell both from the waymarkers hidden in the pavingstones, and also from the fact that an illusion array almost caught and subtly turned him away at the border. Inbuilt privacy, taking an entire garden just for himself.

Huan Hua Palace has thousands of other gardens, of course. It isn't really being deprived of anything. It's just yet another sign of the excess that Luo Binghe has come to know as the sect's trademark style, an unnecessary luxury afforded towards a privileged member of the sect. He's only been here for a few months, and yet he feels like he's already become entirely inured to the constant gold gilding everywhere. Soon, he's going to think it's normal and acceptable to walk around dripping with the stuff, and not at all tasteless. The prices he pays.

Luo Binghe walks up to the front door to gently tap at it, when he hears something. It's a low voice from behind the house, not inside it. He pauses, and then follows it. The house has a wrap-around porch, and he walks until he takes the final corner - and there he is. Hallmaster Hou, sitting on the porch and apparently taking in the cherry blossoms.

He's also red faced, actively drinking, and muttering lowly to himself despite having no company that Luo Binghe can see.

Ah, Luo Binghe thinks. *He's drunk.*

He can work with that.

"... rude brats, back talking their elders… back in *my* day--"

"Hallmaster Hou?"

The reaction is delayed by a fraction of a second, and exaggerated when it comes. The man jerks, and his drink sloshes over the rim of his cup as he moves, staining his sleeve. He stares at Luo Binghe with wide, startled eyes - unused to being ambushed within the privacy of his own home. Luo Binghe respectfully bows.

“This lowly disciple hopes he isn’t interrupting,” Luo Binghe says, despite obviously doing so. “It is only that this matter has weighed on me for quite some time, and I can’t carry it any longer. Please, would you allow me to speak with you?”

Hallmaster Hou blinks owlishly at him, and then quickly sets his cup down on the porch to the side of him, as if hiding it from view. Luo Binghe can still see the bottle, and he can smell plum wine from where he’s standing.

“It had better be an important matter for you to trespass upon my *home* like this,” he says, visibly straightening his posture. Wisely, he doesn’t attempt to stand.

“It is,” Luo Binghe assures him. “I wouldn’t dare to intrude if it weren’t. Hallmaster Hou, I… I need to apologize to you.”

“... You do?” Hallmaster Hou asks, confusion and suspicion mixing together in his voice.

“I do,” Luo Binghe confirms. “You may not remember this, as it was some months ago - I should have said something *then,* but I was very new to the sect that day and didn’t dare speak up. Head Disciple Gongyi spoke to you about getting me a room--”

“Ah!” Hallmaster Hou bursts out, as if a niggling recognition has finally been realized. “The boy that washed up from the river.”

Almost immediately afterwards, a scowl washes over his face - recalling the moment that Luo Binghe is speaking of.

Luo Binghe smiles. “Yes, that’s me. I’m very grateful for the warm and generous welcome that Huan Hua Palace has given me, but… I really must apologize for the way Gongyi Xiao acted towards you that day - it was on *my* behalf, after all. I was too stunned for words at the way he spoke to you, his elder. It was unforgivably rude of him to act so presumptuously, and I should have stopped him.”

Hallmaster Hou continues to scowl, but starts to nod as Luo Binghe speaks as if in unconscious agreement.

“He is *always* presumptuous,” Hallmaster Hou grouses. “Impertinent upstart.”

“He talks like that to you often?” Luo Binghe asks, injecting shocked astonishment into his voice. “But I thought he was filial and respectful. Everyone says so.”

“Only whenever it suits him,” Hallmaster Hou says. “If an elder has something to say that he doesn’t want to hear then, well - all that filial piety flies right out the window.”

He punctuates the bitter statement with a swig from his cup, apparently forgetting that he meant to hide it from Luo Binghe.

“But how could someone like that become Head Disciple?” Luo Binghe asks, casually taking a seat on the porch next to Hallmaster Hou. Getting settled to stay for a conversation.

“It’s a mystery,” Hallmaster Hou grumbles. “People say that he’s a talented and charming young man, but compared to our *last* Head Disciple he is nothing of the sort.”

“Su Xiyan,” Luo Binghe says.

Hallmaster Hou nods, as if Luo Binghe has made some sort of point.

“Yes,” he says. “Yes, her. Head Disciple Su. Now *she* was a Head Disciple to be proud of. Nothing like him.”

“How so?” Luo Binghe asks. “Everyone speaks so highly of her, but I never had a chance to see her for myself. What was she like?”

“Ah,” Hallmaster Hou says. “She was a great beauty. A *cold* beauty, almost never smiled. She was dedicated heart and soul to her work and the palace, and she made us all proud. She didn’t-- didn’t waste her time playing with *children,* didn’t encourage the disciples to treat her so familiarly… Everyone admired her greatly, and she was courteous to all, but she had *dignity.* She didn’t cross lines, didn’t forget herself… She knew that to keep a distance between herself and the rabble was to protect the respectability of her position. The Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace is the *representative* of Huan Hua Palace. Appearances *matter.”*

He grows increasingly misty eyed as he speaks, something wistful and emotional wrenching at his voice. Halfway through he lifts his cup to drink again, only to find it empty. Luo Binghe, ready and holding the bottle, dutifully refills his cup for him without a word. He wonders what Su Xiyan would have to say, to hear herself being spoken of so warmly by this man. Had she liked him, or disliked him? Had she even known he existed?

It doesn’t really matter, he supposes. She never will hear him speak of her, and she’ll never be around to ever potentially disagree with him, disavow him, or prove him wrong in any way about her character. Her grave is a pedestal she can never be knocked down from.

“And-- and she was from a good family, too. Died in a demon attack while she was still young, the poor souls, but they were a good family. Nobility. Long history of supporting the palace.”

Donations, he means. Money.

“And Gongyi Xiao *isn’t* from a good family,” Luo Binghe checks.

“He isn’t from *any* family,” Hallmaster Hou spits. “He’s a charity case.”

“Ah,” Luo Binghe says, understanding instantly.

In Cang Qiong Mountain Sect children would have to perform in the entrance tests in the hopes of being chosen, showing off their stamina and qi potential by digging holes in the ground. The validity and merit of this test is, in Luo Binghe’s opinion, up to much debate.

The poor, the weak, and the starving are at an immediate disadvantage, whether or not they might have equal or superior qi potential to their more well fed and rested fellow participants. And what's being tested is so vague and abstract that proctors can very easily choose or ignore someone for whatever reason they might have to do so without even having to bother to explain themselves. Bribery, nepotism, attraction, prejudice, spite - all these factors are sheltered comfortably within the framework of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect's entrance test.

But it can at the very least be said that anyone is permitted to *try.* Huan Hua Palace Sect does things differently. There is no test at all. To receive the privilege of joining the sect all one has to do is pay the entrance fee.

It's not an impossibly large price to pay, but it is significant. Some families save for years for the opportunity to send one of their children to the sect. The Palace justifies the fee by claiming that it weeds out all those who do not seriously wish to become cultivators, that it helps to sustain the sect. (Sustain them in silks and white jade, presumably.)

Obviously, this claim doesn't make Huan Hua Palace Sect look very good compared to its rivals. Cang Qiong Mountain Sect allows anyone the chance of being accepted, Tian Yi Overlook Sect accepts anyone willing to swear themselves to lifelong Taoism, and Zhao Hua Temple Sect accepts anyone for one year and a day - after which it will be decided whether or not they've proven themselves worthy enough to stay. To save face, Huan Hua Palace Sect takes on a share of orphans each year, free of charge. How generous and charitable of them, to make an exception and waive the fee that they made and continue to keep, for a small percentage of disciples.

And Gongyi Xiao is one of those people. An orphan.

That means, the thought drifts into his head, *that he won't have anyone outside of the sect to look after him.*

Luo Binghe banishes the thought. It's irrelevant.

"And he lets that influence him, of course," Hallmaster Hou continues sourly. "Long has he pestered the Sect Leader himself with suggestions and proposals to increase the quota of-- of *freeloaders.* It's his pet cause. Trying to slash at the budget this way and that to make it fit… We take on surplus disciples when there aren't enough *legitimate* applicants, and that is it. If we dedicate ourselves towards taking on a set quota of charity cases each year then we risk accepting more disciples than we are capable of. What are we to do then? Should we-- should we *reject* paying disciples, for the sake of accommodating these leeches? Ridiculous! The only reason he would suggest such a thing is because he's one of them himself. He's *biased."*

Is this man seriously finding a way to badmouth someone for pushing to take care of more poor orphans?

Luo Binghe tops up Hallmaster Hou's cup.

"How emotional of him," he makes himself say. Each word tastes like ash in his mouth. "I've heard people say that he's too sentimental to properly lead, and I suppose this must be the

sort of thing they mean. It's sweet, but not exactly practical."

Pleasure flashes across Hallmaster Hou's face as Luo Binghe brings up the recent turn in Gongyi Xiao's reputation. He must have been enjoying the last few months very much, relishing each blow landed upon the Head Disciple's good name. He's been enjoying Luo Binghe's work.

"Precisely, *precisely* what I've been saying all these years," Hallmaster Hou says, taking another drink. "Some people just don't have what it takes. You need to be *tough* sometimes. Can't always hold people's hands and comfort and coddle them."

"Like you," Luo Binghe says. "You don't scramble to appease someone just because they shed a few tears. You stand by your principles."

"Exactly," Hallmaster Hou agrees. "He favors the poor students, you know. I see it, I'm not blind, I know his game… Always defending them or personally tutoring them… Unfair to the others. It's unpresi-- unprecedede-- it's *unheard of* for some-- some *nobody* to be chosen for Head Disciple. Improper. This is what it leads to… You need someone already *invested* in Huan Hua Palace, who has reason to want to protect and nurture it… not warp and twist and cut off pieces of it to give away to others…"

He goes on like that for some time, and Luo Binghe encourages it, listening with an attentive and sympathetic expression in place on his face. Inwardly, he thinks.

So, Gongyi Xiao is an orphan. Taken in by Huan Hua Palace Sect to bolster their numbers during a year with few applicants, disguised as an act of benevolent charity. No family, no connections, and no money to his name. The only resources he has are his talents, his charm… his popularity. The fact that people like him. He must be very aware of this, of how precarious his position truly is, to be dependent on other people's continued good will like that. Such a thing can dry up so quickly, after all - as he's been experiencing first hand.

Perhaps that is the answer to his unwavering kindness to everyone around him. Simple self preservation.

"This is very concerning," Luo Binghe says, once there's a pause in the Hallmaster's increasingly aimless ranting. "That someone so unqualified should be Head Disciple… Someone should do something."

"Yes," Hallmaster Hou says, easily agreeing to the vague statement. "Someone *should.* It's disgraceful, really."

"You should tell someone else these things, Hallmaster," Luo Binghe urges. "You've truly opened my eyes. Better yet - you should make an official complaint. Is it at all appropriate for the Head Disciple to set such a poor example, disrespecting his elders in front of others?"

It's not a grand, conniving blow. It's just yet another complication to add onto a growing load of them, death by a thousand cuts.

"I… yes, maybe I *should,"* Hallmaster Hou says uncertainly. A coward at heart.

“It seems as if people have been finally waking up to Gongyi Xiao's unsuitability lately,” Luo Binghe encourages. This, he thinks, is when the man needs one last push to make up his mind. Luo Binghe should give him something. Confiding some weakness of Gongyi Xiao’s to him, something for the man to gleefully want to make as many people aware of as possible.

Like his insubordinate and radical opinions about torture, his disdain for the Water Prison. That would be perfect.

“You have my full support in this matter,” is what Luo Binghe says instead.

It’s too early. It would be clumsy, forced, *wasted* on this petty man. Luo Binghe should save it. He should save it, and wait for a more opportune time to spend it so that it will make a better impact. That’s why he isn’t using it yet. He’s waiting.

It has nothing to do with how *slimy* this is making him feel. Luo Binghe is used to getting his hands dirty, to do what needs to be done in order to survive. He spent five years in the abyss, covered in filth for so long that it became like a second skin to him. He doesn’t let *disgust* make him hesitate.

This man does disgust him, though.

“It’s about time,” he mutters. “The truth always comes out in the end. People always see eventually…”

“Yes, Hallmaster,” Luo Binghe says, and he decides that he’s done enough here.

Either Hallmaster Hou will make his complaints, or he won’t. He likely will, given enough time to stew on it, fretting over the idea like a seed planted in his mind. He’ll check the waters first, seeing how receptive people might be to it, and he’ll find people to be more amenable than they have been in the past. He’ll be hungry and eager for validation, vindication, agreement. He’ll make his complaints, and he’ll be louder and sharper and more vitriolic than most others. People will think that he goes too far - but also, that he has a point. He will become the new extreme, setting the bar even lower than before.

See? He’s still making progress on his plan. He’s still committed. Just because he’d had a single moment of weakness, just because he doesn’t *want* to hurt Gongyi Xiao, doesn’t mean that he won’t do it. He’s proven as much today. He’ll claw and drag and *force* him out of Huan Hua Palace, just to steal his position for himself. There’s nothing he isn’t willing to do.

“Thank you for indulging this lowly disciple,” he says, standing up and bowing again. “I will cease bothering you now, and leave you be. Many thanks for Hallmaster Hou’s wisdom.”

Hallmaster Hou, drunk and flustered, stumbles over his words as he dismisses him. Luo Binghe, barely restraining the urge to pour the rest of the plum wine over the man’s head, departs with a tight smile.

The day is young, after all. There is much work still left to be done.

A Devious Scheme

Chapter Summary

If the palace is an empire of its own, then the Little Palace Mistress is its spoiled princess.

She doesn't look like a particularly happy spoiled princess, though.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 17.6k words long.

Luo Binghe has had luxury and decadence inflicted upon him near constantly since his arrival at Huan Hua Palace. He thinks if he scraped up every inch of incidental gold gilding in the palace then he'd have enough of it to buy an entire village, that he could build a small mountain with all the decorative white jade, and that there's enough fine silk to drown in. Lavish opulence and excess are how the sect flexes its power and influence, showing off its wealth and prosperity for all to see.

More traditional sects may look down upon them for it, but merchants and commonfolk certainly don't. Luo Binghe thinks he's detected a certain vein of insecurity and jealousy there, but Huan Hua still leans hard into displaying its riches nonetheless. It's what sets them apart from the other sects, the area in which they are indisputably superior to any other. So what if they don't have as long of a history, their rituals not as cemented, their reputation not as unworldly? They have *money,* a tangible and material resource that they can offer or withhold at their leisure, that *everyone* needs. It doesn't matter how mystical or ethereal other sects like to pretend to be; at the end of the day, they still have to pay the bills.

Still, though. Luo Binghe has seen some truly ridiculous displays of wealth since he arrived here, but this is *something else.*

Glowing night pearls dot the ceiling in the shape of star constellations, turning it into a depiction of the night sky. The walls are draped with intricate silk tapestries and elegant paintings. The floor shines with a polished luster, wood with inlaid images of gold, playful and graceful depictions of foxes chasing cats chasing mice, repeating in a hypnotic pattern. There are fresh, colorful bouquets of flowers bursting forth from white jade vases, the perfume of them hanging fragrant in the air. There's a vanity covered in half opened jewelry boxes, revealing a messy sprawl of sparkling gems, gold and jade hair pins and necklaces and more within, enough finery to outfit an entire jewelry store. A grand wardrobe stands open,

showing a truly vast collection of fine robes and dresses and slippers, enough outfits to clothe dozens of dozens of ladies. And in the center of this nexus of wealth and prosperity, there is a bed. It's large enough for half a dozen people to sleep in comfortably, drowning in silken sheets and outfitted with fine porcelain pillows, the bedframe intricately carved with an ornate attention to detail.

Half the tapestries have been torn off the walls, left in ragged heaps on the floor. One of the precious vases has been smashed to pieces, flowers stomped viciously into the floor. A table has been fully overturned. Much of the fine jewelry has been thrown out of the boxes, glittering chains of gold snapped like cheap twine, gems and pearls cast onto the floor like disdained rocks. Sheets and pillows lie tossed and thrown onto the floor in a messy tangle, porcelain shards dotting them like debris. And through the half open door to the wardrobe, it can be seen that most of the clothes have been dragged down to the bottom, creating a nest out of dyed and pearl embroidered silks.

In that nest, hidden within the wardrobe, sits the Little Palace Mistress. She has her knees tucked up to her chest, her arms wrapped around them, hiding her face against her knees. Her hair is loose and down, as if she's torn her hair pins out in a fit of anger, and it leaves her looking disheveled and unguarded.

It really says something, that Luo Binghe is genuinely unsure if the grandness of her bedroom is being exaggerated by the dream or not. For all he knows, this is what her room really looks like. He would be incredulous but - somehow, at the same time - entirely unsurprised. If the palace is an empire of its own, then the Little Palace Mistress is its spoiled princess.

She doesn't look like a particularly *happy* spoiled princess, though. Right now she looks both miserable and quietly furious about it. Sulking.

Luo Binghe hasn't been asked to intervene in any scenes made by the Little Palace Mistress lately. Perhaps it's because this is what she's been doing with her time instead: silently fuming in her room, avoiding anyone that might make her lose her temper. Trying not to make the ongoing mess any worse than it already is.

That's not what I told you to do, Luo Binghe finds himself thinking. *I told you to* be there *for him. How can you do that if you're hiding away?*

Not that it matters.

"Fu-shimei," he says, crouching down by the half open doors of the wardrobe.

The Little Palace Mistress startles, and then emerges from her curled tight ball to look up at him. Her face is flushed and furiously tear streaked, but it instantly lights up with surprised happiness at the sight of him.

Or rather, at the sight of Gongyi Xiao. She has never once smiled like that at Luo Binghe, after all.

"Gongyi-shixiong," she says, unfurling like a flower to the sun.

He doesn't return the smile.

"What is all of this?" he asks, gesturing towards her room. At the wreckage of it, so much beauty and wealth torn down and to pieces in a fit of rage. The cost of her destruction must be breathtaking, and yet to her it is negligible. Only she would break something so precious for the sake of venting her feelings.

She looks at it, and then away.

"I was annoyed," she says, a deliberate dismissive haughtiness passing over her for a moment. *It's not a big deal,* her tone seems to say. *Just a little mess - nothing some cleaning up won't fix. Let's move on.*

"So you destroyed your room?" he asks, and he makes disapproval color his voice.

She doesn't catch it, though - too subtle. She leans forwards and grasps his hand.

"You came to visit me," she says. "Good. You've been pulling away."

Has he? Not wanting to taint the Little Palace Mistress with his spoiling reputation, maybe. Pointless, really; it's not as if *she* has any kind of reputation to protect.

"For a reason," he says, pulling his hand away from hers.

Her hand stays in the air for a moment, as if confused by the sudden absence of his touch. The smile on her face is beginning to slowly falter and wane, dimming.

"... What reason?" she asks cautiously, a look in her eye like an animal that has scented something amiss. There's no fierce snarl on her face, no wary scowl. She's so defenseless like this, when she thinks she's speaking with Gongyi Xiao. He feels like he's been given a knife and offered an upturned belly, soft and unprotected. Cutting her right now would be like slicing into butter. Easy.

"You have to ask?" he asks incredulously. He stands above her, gesturing at her ruined room. "Because of things like *this,* Fu-shimei. Who cleans these tantrums of yours up? Do you think they don't talk about it? Do you think people don't whisper about you? And then *I* get associated with it, because *you--"* A sneer, disdainful, "cling to me."

The Little Palace Mistress looks up at him, unmoving. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't blink. She looks frozen in place, stunned.

He sighs, rubbing at his face with one hand, shoulders tiredly slumping.

"I'm *trying* to be nice to you," he says, voice twisting bitterly. "To say no as little as possible, to placate and humor you - but could you please put *some* thought into the position I'm stuck in? Everyone's turning against me. I'm trying to stay afloat, and you're like an *anchor* tied to me. You're drowning me."

"No," the Little Palace Mistress says immediately. It sounds thoughtless, a knee jerk denial.

"Yes," he presses. "I know you have this-- *pathetic* obsession with me, but do you think that means that you can treat me however you like? As if--" He remembers a joking suggestion, mocking and followed by laughter, "--as if I'm your *pet?"*

"No," she says again, but this time the word wavers with emotion. She grabs the wardrobe door, pulls herself up so he isn't looming over her any longer. "No, that's *not* it! That's not how I see you at all! That's not how I feel about you. I--"

"What," he cuts her off harshly. "Do you think you *love me?* Is that it? You love me - and so that means I should love you back? Because you always get what you want, yes? You want me, so you get me - whether I want you back or not. What, exactly, have you done to earn my love? What have you *ever* done for me? When have you helped me, or been *anything* but a burden? Something for me to manage and soothe, to apologize for, always cleaning up your messes and playing interference. Do you think that's fun for me? Do you think I enjoy it, Fu-shimei?"

"That's not--" she says, and her own voice breaks down on her. Her eyes are bright and white all around the edges, her chest rising and falling like she needs to gasp for air. She looks like she's been struck. When she swallows, her throat clicks.

He exerts pressure on the dream, pushing her sleeping mind closer to the surface of the Dream Realm. Making all of those physical sensations *real,* blurring the line, dream seeping into waking. Wherever she's sleeping now, likely in her palatial bed, she's tossing and turning. It makes the dream more unsteady, but also more *visceral.*

He wants her to remember this.

"You don't have to do any of those things," she croaks. "You don't have to, to--"

"Oh, but I do. That's the point of me, isn't it? It's what I'm for. You make a mess, and then everyone looks to *me,* expecting me to put it right. Just because you're used to ignoring everyone's expectations doesn't mean that I can get away with doing the same. We're different. No matter *what* you do or say, you'll always be the Little Palace Mistress. But *me*-- I'm expendable. Anyone can be made Head Disciple. It doesn't have to be me."

"No," she gasps out. He looks like he's threatened her with something horrible. "I'll *kill them* if they try to get rid of you!"

"What," he says flatly, tired and unimpressed. "The whole palace? How do you think that's going to work out for you? Use your brain and *think,* for once in your life. This isn't a problem you can fix by snapping your whip at people. It isn't a problem you can fix at all."

Her next breath catches painfully on the way out of her throat, a choked sob that reverberates through her body and the dream both. The room shifts and warps, breaks more, as if her tantrum was twice as destructive. All the vases are broken now, the sheets and pillows and tapestries torn and *burned.* Holes in the walls.

Twist the knife, he thinks. *Killing blow.*

“What do your feelings amount to, if they don’t ever stop you from sabotaging and hurting me, from dragging me down? Your love is *pointless.* It might as well not exist.”

He tries to summon all the venom he can bring forth to coat the words, but somehow he finds that it’s already there, freely welling up like blood.

“That’s not true,” she chokes out. “It’s not true, it’s not true… I’d do anything for you.”

“And yet you keep only doing the things you *want* to do. Threatening and menacing people, getting into fights. That doesn’t help me. You don’t help. All you ever do is--” Above them, the night sky made of glowing pearls in the ceiling cracks and splinters to pieces like a broken heart. “--get in my way.”

“You’re the only thing that matters in this entire palace,” the Little Palace Mistress says rawly. “The *only* thing.”

“I’m not your thing,” he says. “And you don’t own me.”

The ceiling caves in and descends, walls buckling, the floor crumbling beneath them. There’s too much emotion, the kind that’s so sharp and intense that the body feels it like an injury, a tender bruise-ache that floods the chest and chokes the throat. She’s waking up.

Luo Binghe could clutch at her, trap her in a nightmare that won’t let her escape. He could not let her go until he’s well and truly made his point. Grind salt into the wound.

He doesn’t. He lets go immediately, lets her slip away to snap awake gasping and sweat soaked in her bed, to cry or break the closest available thing at hand, to tremble with heartbreak or relief that it wasn’t real. Whatever she likes.

He’s done enough here.

Luo Binge sleeps lightly. He did so before the vicious viper’s nest of the demon courts, and before even the constant danger of the Eternal Abyss. He learned the habit on Qing Jing Peak. Everyone there knew that he slept in the woodshed, and that it had no locks. His shixiongs could come and pay him a visit whenever the whim might strike them, and so Luo Binghe taught himself how to sleep with one eye open, listening for approaching footsteps or whispers, the creak of an opening door, shifting wood planks.

He doesn’t need to be a light sleeper to be woken by the rude arrival that comes to his rooms like a whirlwind that morning. One moment, he is sleeping. The next his door has been torn open, the chain lock keeping it closed snapped apart like cheap twine. He’s out of his bed and on his feet as the furious cry of, *“Luo Binghe!”* rings through his rooms.

It’s the Little Palace Mistress herself, brimming with fury and determination. She’s properly dressed in her pretty pink as usual, although her hair has been twisted into a much less elaborate style than usual, betraying impatience. He can just see her snapping at the unfortunate handmaiden of the week: *hurry up already!*

She swings her head around like a searching bull, spots him, and then charges straight for him like she intends to walk straight through him. The only reason Luo Binghe doesn't reach for his sword is that she isn't touching her whip.

She doesn't have her whip on her at all, actually, which is a startlingly unusual sight. Normally, she's never to be seen without it. She--

"You," she says, and she reaches forward to grab the collar of his robe. He instinctively moves to dodge her, and she looks outraged.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asks, his hair bound in a simple braid, wearing nothing but his sleep robes. His mind is racing, trying to gauge just how bad this is. He was in her dreams, and he was *not* subtle, but how could she possibly have guessed it was him? He never even let her see his face. She has no reason to think it was anything but a particularly vivid nightmare, how could she--?

The Little Palace Mistress stops herself from grabbing for him again, squeezing her eyes shut and taking a deep breath. She looks like she'd rather be doing anything else than standing still, a fiery vigor coiling urgently underneath her skin. When she opens her eyes they're just a little too wide, a little too forceful.

"Help me," she says, and it comes out like an order rather than a plea.

"... With?" he asks.

"Gongyi-shixiong!" she snaps, like he's an idiot to need the clarification. Which, maybe he is. When have they ever spoken of anything else with each other? "You claim you care about him, so fine then. Prove it! Help me *fix this."*

… Ah. Okay.

It's not like he expected her to huff and turn her back to Gongyi Xiao over one bad dream. She's not Qin Wanrong, fickle and flighty and careless. She's too devoted for that, too loyal. But he thought that she just might let it put *distance* between the two of them. For *his* sake, so that she wouldn't continue to be a burden on him.

Apparently, that's not the way she's chosen to react to the nightmare at all. He seems to have only lit a fire under her, sending her running to his doorstep the second morning arrived, frantic and frazzled and demanding a solution from him.

Of course she wouldn't give up that easily. She's only the most stubborn woman alive.

"... By 'this' you mean--"

"Everything!" she snaps. "People making fun of him, and not listening to him, and ignoring him, and gossiping, and-- *all of it."*

People have been ignoring his orders? Luo Binghe had missed that development.

"Right," he says. "And you want me to fix… *all* of that."

He does his best to convey to her just how ridiculous the demand is with just his tone of voice. He thinks she catches it, from how venomously she glares at him.

“I’m sick and tired of *reacting,* and fighting against the tide,” she seethes. “You think the best thing to be done in the face of so much disrespect is to just ignore it. Fine. Fine! I’ll act like I’m deaf! But that shouldn’t be all we’re doing. Why do I have to just sit around and wait and watch as things get worse, and nothing else? I want to do something. I want to be proactive. I want to attack *first.”*

She snapped awake from that nightmare during the dead of the night, hours away from sunrise. Has she been awake ever since, fuming and stewing over this? Working herself up into a frenzy, it seems.

“And what exactly is this *something* that you want to do?” he asks, curious in spite of himself.

She looks at him expectantly.

“... You want *me* to tell you what that is,” he concludes tiredly.

Putting her hands on her hips, she manages to look down her nose at him despite being several inches shorter.

“And why not?” she asks him. “You’re always criticizing and looking down on me, acting like you’re so clever and above everyone else. Well then, show me! I’ll try it your way. Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. Come up with a plan of attack, and I’ll follow it.”

Luo Binghe opens his mouth to dissuade her - and he hesitates.

She came to him. Waited for the earliest possible moment, and then showed up on his doorstep with her presumptuous demands, arrogantly commandeering him for her own purposes. She’s glaring at him right now, impatiently waiting for him to spin up a plan out of thin air to give her so she can follow it. Placing herself into his hands.

Doesn’t that, in a way, betray a certain sense of trust? Of respect for his capabilities? She’s desperate, and she came to *him* of all people, and so there’s at least a part of her that seriously thinks that there’s something he can do to help her.

This is an opportunity, he finds himself thinking. She’s asking him for help - demanding it, because she probably doesn’t even know *how* to beg for something. She feels helpless and desperate, and if he now *doesn’t* let her down, if he gives her exactly what she wants--

Well. She’ll remember that, won’t she? It’ll make an impact, certainly.

It wouldn’t be contradictory to his plans. He *needs* to seduce the Little Palace Mistress, after all. It’s a necessary step. Slowing down the sabotage against Gongyi Xiao just a little would be an affordable sacrifice. It’s a boulder rolling down the hill; it has its own momentum by now. People enjoy the narrative of a popular, well liked, successful man spiraling and breaking. The downfall of someone you feel inferior to is *satisfying.* If Luo Binghe jabs a

stick through the spokes then that won't be the end of it. It'll only be a brief reprieve, that's all.

This is a good idea, a good opportunity, a good strategy. It must be, because excitement is curling in his belly at the thought of it. Luo Binghe trusts his instincts.

"I might have an idea," he grants slowly, as if reluctantly being persuaded. His mind is already turning, leafing through memories to find said idea. He's only been keeping an eye out for opportunities to *sabotage* Gongyi Xiao, but how hard can it be to turn one of those opportunities on its head?

"Well, use it then!" the Little Palace Mistress snaps. Her eyes lit up at the first sign of him wavering, and she looks like she's just barely stopping herself from diving forward to physically rattle a plan of attack out of him. "Out with it already, Luo-shixiong."

A memory snags in his recollections, standing out from the rest. *Oh,* he thinks. *Yes, that.*

"You'll have to do exactly as I say for it to work," Luo Binghe says. "You can't lose your temper in the middle of things and ignore me. That'll just ruin it."

"Yes, yes, I know," the Little Palace Mistress says, irritated. "I know what I'm asking for! Just tell me already. What is it?"

Luo Binghe tells her.

The Little Palace Mistress hates his plan. She has many complaints about it, and constantly tries to poke holes in or criticize it. The thing she hates about it the most, however, is the most essential component of it: patience.

"I told you that I was tired of reacting, that I wanted to act first," she says. "And then you tell me to *wait* so I can *react to someone else."*

"This is completely different," Luo Binghe lectures. "You're not waiting blindly for other people's actions. You know exactly what you're waiting for, and you have a plan readied and in place. You're not reacting; you're setting a trap."

"It feels hell of a lot like just more of the same," she grumbles, but she acquiesces as well. She had promised to give his plan a chance, and that is exactly what she does. With much ill grace, granted.

And so, they wait.

Luckily, it doesn't take *too* long for things to click into place. It's only days later that Luo Binghe receives his first promising indication.

He's helping Shao Wenling oversee the seasonal transfers of Bronze disciples moving up to the Silver Dorm, and Silver disciples up to the Gold Dorm. He likes to make himself useful, after all.

“A new crop of disciples will be coming in only a few months,” Shao Wenling tells him. With a stick of charcoal and a scroll in hand, she looks very official and professional as she carefully watches over bustling disciples packing up their personal belongings and leaving their old beds behind in neat and orderly condition. “We like to move everyone up a step before that, so that everything will be in place in time for the newcomers. It’s much less chaotic than doing everything at once.”

“How clever,” Luo Binghe praises. “Was that an idea of Hallmaster Hou’s?”

Shao Wenling preens a little proudly; she’s Hallmaster Hou’s personal assistant. “Yes, actually. He implemented it only some years ago, but it’s already a clear improvement over the old way of doing things.”

Luo Binghe had already known that it had been Hallmaster Hou’s idea. The man seems to make a pattern of trying out some new ‘clever’ idea of his out on the dorms every few years, changing up the way things are done. It seems to be rather hit or miss. Enforcing an earlier curfew had been a failed experiment that had necessitated backpedaling, as it had only resulted in hundreds of restless teenagers being packed together in close quarters hours before being able to fall asleep. Dividing the halls by gender had likewise been a failure; sweethearts had apparently enjoyed the thrill of sneaking out to meet with each other, and there had been plenty of disciples who had enjoyed experimenting with their fellow dorm members. This, however, has been one of the man’s ideas that seem to have stuck.

“Very efficient,” Luo Binghe says appreciatively. “How *is* Hallmaster Hou, by the way? I haven’t seen him in some time.”

Shao Wenling shoots him a look, and it looks half speculative.

“He’s well,” she answers. “... He asked after you some time ago, actually.”

“Oh? What for?”

“He was curious about you. He said that the two of you had had a conversation?” She asks the question in an overly idle sort of way, pointedly looking down at her scroll as she speaks as if she’s barely paying attention to what she’s saying. He knows hidden curiosity when he sees it.

“Ah, yes. Nothing serious; I only wanted to properly introduce myself to him, really.”

“I see, I see,” she says. He’s not sure that she entirely buys it, with how quickly she finds an excuse to dart away. A disciple has made his bed sloppily, and she swoops upon him to show him how to do it properly. Luo Binghe occupies himself by helping another disciple fit all of her books into her pack, finishing his task at the same time as Shao Wenling.

“It’s only,” she says abruptly the second that they drift back towards each other, belying her casual tone, “ever since he asked about you, he’s seemed preoccupied by something.”

“Oh?” Luo Binghe asks. “What?”

She reaches to tug at her hair, and then seems to catch herself halfway through the motion, stopping before she disturbs her neat hairstyle.

“He keeps bringing up an idea to… make an appeal,” she says. She bites her lip for a moment, and then says, “I think he wants to ask the Old Palace Master to fire someone.”

Luo Binghe’s attention sharpens at *once.*

“Does he now?” he asks, as if every part of him isn’t entirely focused on this line of conversation. “Do you know who?”

“No,” Shao Wenling says. She’s starting to look uncomfortable, as if she regrets saying as much as she has. As if she knows that she wasn’t *supposed* to say as much as she has. “He only says that incompetence has been permitted within the palace for too long, so I suppose it must be someone who’s been a long term problem.”

“Well, that can’t be tolerated,” Luo Binghe says. *Fire.* He’d urged the Hallmaster to make an official complaint, but he seems to have taken Luo Binghe’s advice a step beyond even that. It’s an *audacious* request for a man to make of his Sect Leader. No wonder he’s nervously dithering over it, hesitant and second guessing himself. “It sounds as if Hallmaster Hou is only doing his duty.”

“Yes,” Shao Wenling says, her shoulders relaxing slightly. “Yes, exactly. He only wants what is best for the sect.”

“Do you think,” Luo Binghe asks, his tone careless and his intent anything but, “that he’s going to go through with it?”

“Well,” Shao Wenling says, and she hesitates for another moment. Luo Binghe bites his tongue and gives her time to cave on her own. Prying at her might only make her clam up.

In the end, his patience is rewarded, because she continues.

“He’s inviting some of his peers and other respected masters to his office tomorrow evening,” she says. “He’ll be asking them for their support before he goes to the Old Palace Master with his request. If they agree, then it will be much more persuasive than just him alone making the argument. It will show that he isn’t alone in his views.”

Using others to bolster his lack of spine, hiding his opinion among the crowd. Luo Binghe’s mind begins to spin, taking in this development, how it might be used. It’s not the exact shape he’d expected for this thread to take, but…

This works. This definitely still works.

“I wish him success in his efforts,” Luo Binghe says mildly. And then, distracting, “Ah, over there. It seems like we’ve got another property dispute on our hands.”

“Oh, not again,” Shao Wenling says, her attention fastening at once onto two disciples viciously disagreeing with each other about who is the actual rightful owner of what appears

to be a *comb.* “This happens every year. Why can’t they keep track of who is lending and who is borrowing?”

“They look fairly passionate,” Luo Binghe remarks wryly. “We should probably intervene before it becomes physical, hm?”

“Let’s,” Shao Wenling agrees tiredly.

The proceeding conflict takes an inordinate amount of time to settle, during which there is shouting, threats, insults, weeping, heckling from the crowd, and at least three incidents where they have to bodily prevent the argument from escalating into a full on fight. By the end of it Shao Wenling is disarrayed and exasperated to disgruntled exhaustion, and seems to have fully forgotten the previous topic of discussion. That suits Luo Binghe just fine.

He tracks down and tells the Little Palace Mistress at once. He makes sure to do it *privately,* of course. His decision to do so is immediately vindicated by her reaction.

“That slimy *rat!”* she cries furiously, muffled by the rose bushes they’re hiding amongst. She reaches automatically for her spiritual weapon, and her hand meets only air - she still isn’t carrying her whip. The reminder of its absence seems to only further incense her. “How dare he? Always bothering Gongyi-shixiong and making messes for him to clean up, and now *this?* I’m going to kill him!”

“That’s not the plan,” Luo Binghe reminds her, as if she’s perhaps forgotten.

“Gongyi-shixiong getting *fired* isn’t the plan either!” she snaps at him, flushed bright red with anger. She looks ready to tear someone limb from limb with her bare hands. A very specific someone, right at this moment. “We have to stop him before he holds that meeting. We have to, to-- we have to *threaten* him! We’ll blackmail him, or-- or something! He *cannot* be allowed to go through with this.”

“Why not?” Luo Binghe asks, which is maybe a slightly too cavalier way to approach his point. She looks ready to tear *him* limb from limb for the offense. He holds up a quelling hand. “No, really. Hallmaster Hou is being an *idiot,* Fu-shimei. Gongyi-shixiong may not currently be seen in a favorable light, but not enough so to justify *firing* him. He’s been a much beloved Head Disciple for many years now; it will take something substantial to convince the Old Palace Master to actually get rid of him. As things currently stand, he wouldn’t grant the request.”

It’s true. Hallmaster Hou is quite blatantly overreaching, greedily and stupidly asking for far too much far too soon. Luo Binghe’s suggestion had been much more reasonable. Now that he’s thinking about it, that’s likely why Hallmaster Hou had felt the need to escalate in the way that he has in the first place. It hadn’t felt enough like his own idea for the likes of his ego; he’d needed to put his own spin on it to make it feel like his own. Luo Binghe should have been more artful, should have worked the conversation so that the man would think that *he’d* come up with the idea. Sloppy of him.

The Little Palace Mistress bites her lip, looking upset at even the mention of a possibility of her father ripping Gongyi Xiao's title from him.

"But what if he does convince all those other masters to support his request?" the Little Palace Mistress demands. "Wouldn't *that* be substantial?"

"It would be," he admits. "Even if it wouldn't convince the Old Palace Master to fire him right then and there, it's not as if having a group of respected and powerful cultivators demanding he be removed would reflect *well* on him."

"Then the safest thing would be to stop the meeting from happening at all," she insists.

"No. If it's prevented then Hallmaster Hou will just try again later. I think we should make sure that he absolutely does go through with this meeting; it's a perfect opportunity," Luo Binghe says. "We'll allow him to make his attempt, only so we can guarantee that it will fail *disastrously."*

The Little Palace Mistress takes a deep breath, and visibly hesitates. Reluctant to place not only herself into his hands so utterly, but Gongyi Xiao as well. To completely rely and depend on his wit and advice to guide her, to allow her most precious person's position and welfare to be *gambled* on his word.

But in the end, she nods - and Luo Binghe knows that if he fails in this then she will never trust him again.

That's fine. He only tolerates success from himself nowadays anyway. Failure already isn't an acceptable option.

"Fine," she says. "Let's get to it, then."

So they do.

Luo Binghe taps on the door and waits patiently. It doesn't take long for it to slide open, revealing a peering Hallmaster Hou. He does a double take as he sees that it's Luo Binghe, as if he'd expected it to be someone else.

"Hallmaster Hou," Luo Binghe says, bowing respectfully. "This humble disciple hopes he isn't disturbing you."

"What are you doing--? Nevermind. Yes, I'm sorry to say that you *are* disturbing me. I have a rather important appointment soon, and I can't afford a distraction at the moment. You'll have to come back later."

Luo Binghe had decided to wait until the day of the meeting, to cut it as closely as possible. The Little Palace Mistress had been left tense and unhappy with the decision, but it's the best way to do things. Hallmaster Hou does indeed look like he's prepared himself for an important meeting with some important people. He's wearing robes that look more opulent than his usual fare - and his usual fare is by no means humble - his fingers heavy with golden

rings and a thick chain hung around his neck. He also looks twitchy and strained with nerves, his posture rigid and his hands restless.

He suspects that Hallmaster Hou may very well be suffering from a bout of cold feet, desperately second guessing himself at the last minute. He looks at the very edge of coming up with an excuse to call the entire thing off. That won't do at all.

Which is why Luo Binghe is here.

"I understand completely, Hallmaster," Luo Binghe says. "Truth be told, I've actually heard whispers of this appointment, and what you're planning on doing. That's why I'm here."

"You know-- *how?"* Hallmaster Hou demands, eyes widening with alarm before narrowing. "Who told you?"

"Your assistant, Shao Wenling," Luo Binghe says, throwing her underneath the cart without hesitation. Why not? It's not as if she's important. "Hallmaster Hou, I applaud your initiative. You continue to have my complete and utter support. I want to help you in your efforts in any way that I can… which is why I've brought a very important person here today."

Luo Binghe takes a step to the side and turns his body as he says these last words, prompting Hallmaster Hou to follow his shifting gaze.

The Little Palace Mistress takes her cue, stepping forward so that she's in plain view, no longer hidden by the angle of the doorway.

Hallmaster Hou pales immediately and dramatically at the sight of her. Luo Binghe has to bite his cheek to stop himself from grinning with malicious amusement.

"Palace Mistress," he chokes out. "It-- it's not what you--"

"You're not trying to get rid of Gongyi-shixiong?" the Little Palace Mistress asks. "How disappointing."

Hallmaster Hou's face goes blank with shock. He needs a moment to gather himself before speaking again.

"I… truly, Palace Mistress? I, I was under the impression that you and Head Disciple Gongyi were…" He hesitates, searching for a polite, euphemistic way of putting it. "... close."

The Little Palace Mistress' adoration of Gongyi Xiao is a *well* known fact in the palace. This sudden apparent change must be both unexpected and confusing.

She lifts her chin imperiously, looking disdainful and haughty - and intensely uncomfortable as well.

"Apparently," she says stiffly, "not as much as *I* thought we were."

It wouldn't be accurate to call the Little Palace Mistress a bad liar. Rather, she isn't a liar *at all.* Luo Binghe has been paying attention to her ever since the first moment he met her, and

as far as he's been able to see she is never anything *but* honest, even to her own detriment. She's the type of person for whom it doesn't even occur to lie or cloak her true feelings. If she's upset, she shows it. If she loathes you, she grinds your face in it. And if she loves you, she makes sure that every last person in the palace is aware of it.

Because of this, Luo Binghe had been wary of this part of their (his) plan. He'd made sure to practice with her first, to see just how awful her performance might be. The Little Palace Mistress is not exactly known for her subtlety.

She's kind of terrible at it and yet also not, all at the same time. As she speaks her face is screwed up into a fixed scowl, her fine brows furrowed and set like stone. It's clear to see that she's just barely stopping herself from gritting her teeth in furious disgust at her own words, at having to play along with this worm of a man. But it kind of works? If one didn't know better then her fury could, just perhaps, be mistaken for hatred towards the man they're speaking *of* instead of the man she's speaking *to.* Her awkward discomfort could be wounded dignity, in the right light.

That must be the exact light Hallmaster Hou is seeing her in, because his tense, wary body language softens, opens. Interest seeps into his eyes, his curiosity successfully intrigued. Eager to see an opportunity.

"Is that so?" he asks. Then he looks up and down the hall, and pushes the sliding door wider open. "We shouldn't speak out in the hall. Please, come inside."

The Little Palace Mistress takes the invitation without a word, marching into his office like an empress entering her own chambers. Luo Binghe follows at her heels, as if it should only be assumed that he of course is included in the invitation. He doesn't make any attempts to hide the bag he's carrying, its strap hanging from his shoulder. He merely holds it like it's nothing of importance at all. It's just a bag, probably containing something boring and mundane, like scrolls someone has asked him to transport. Nothing worthy of notice.

Hallmaster Hou's office is grand and richly appointed, to properly denote his status. The ceiling is high, the walls spaced far apart, and the floor polished to a shining luster. Calligraphy has been hung up on the walls, golden lamps lighting up the room, and a tasteful amount of incense is burning. There is an imposing desk at the head of the room, but it seems like a long table has been set out in the middle of the room specially for this meeting. Tea bowls have already been set out in preparation, and Luo Binghe counts twelve place settings.

Luo Binghe stays silent, stopping himself from making the opening move. It's time for him to fade away into the background. It's the Little Palace Mistress' show now, and so he needs to let her take center stage.

"Hallmaster," she starts as soon as the two of them are seated at one end of the table, brusque and abrupt. "I've heard that you want to convince daddy to throw out Gongyi-shixiong. Is that true or not?"

"Well-- not necessarily throw him out," Hallmaster Hou blusters, flustered. "He hasn't done anything serious enough to be outright exiled from the sect, I'm not claiming that. But I don't believe-- that is, I think it's clear to see that he's been conducting himself in a *most*

inappropriate manner for someone who holds the venerable title of Head Disciple. Do… Do you think so as well, Palace Mistress?"

When Luo Binghe had first told the Little Palace Mistress of her role in this plan, she had been outraged and offended. *You want me to sit there and* smile *as that rat insults Gongyi-shixiong?* she'd demanded, mutinous at the very idea of it.

You don't have to smile, Luo Binghe had responded. *Just act like he's talking about me instead, if that helps.*

He doesn't know whether or not she's using his advice, but she very definitely does not smile.

"I do," she says grimly. She doesn't elaborate, which Luo Binghe supposes would be asking for too much.

Nonetheless, Hallmaster Hou seems encouraged by this simple agreement. It is a well known fact within the palace that the Old Palace Master shamelessly spoils his only daughter rotten. The sheer allure of having her on his side must be intoxicating, enough to make him stupid and reckless with it.

"Many other people do as well," he says eagerly. "Plenty of people have complaints, *plenty* of people. Frankly, I don't think that he's fit for the amount of responsibility he's been given. One could say that he's been ill done by, given a duty that he never had the ability to carry out in the first place. So, really, if you think about it, taking his title away would only be the best thing for him - as well as for the sect, of course. We'd be doing him a favor."

Luo Binghe can see the Little Palace Mistress' dainty little hands curl into tight fists on her lap, her nails no doubt digging into the flesh of her palms. The moment Luo Binghe came up with this plan, he knew that *this* was always going to be the most perilous step. The part where the Little Palace Mistress would have to listen to a man insult her Gongyi Xiao and not only resist launching herself at him, but to *agree* with him.

Don't do it, he wills at her. *Don't lose control. Don't attack him. Hold strong.*

"I don't want to do him a favor," she spits out, looking seethingly hateful. "I want to take everything away from him."

Hallmaster Hou pauses at the plain and obvious venom in her voice. Yes, Luo Binghe thinks, that was good. That's exactly how she'd do it if this were real. Not even entertaining the notion of playing along with the comforting lies and excuses that others might use to ease their consciences or protect their image, discomfitingly frank and open with her petty, vicious hatred.

"May I be impertinent enough to ask where this… sudden vitriol comes from?" Hallmaster Hou asks carefully. "You've always seemed fond of Head Disciple Gongyi before."

The Little Palace Mistress takes a deep breath. Another.

“He said,” she says, as if shoving the words out of her mouth, “that he resents me. That I make him look bad, with my behavior. That I *drag him down.”*

For a moment the words tease at Luo Binghe’s recognition, something familiar in them - and then it clicks. The dream he gave her. She’s using the very words he threw at her for inspiration.

She remembers it *very* well, then.

“He said,” she forces herself to go on, “that he doesn’t want to marry--”

The Little Palace Mistress stops, trembling with emotion. Her knuckles are stark white now, with how tightly she’s clenching them. It would be an incredible performance, if it were a performance at all. But it isn’t; it’s real. She can’t even make herself finish the sentence. The words are too painful to speak.

“Ah,” Hallmaster Hou says, eyes widening with realization. He seems to just barely stop himself from clapping in excited glee, instead gripping his own knees and forcing a mask of sympathy on his face. “What a cruel, heartless young man!”

The Little Palace Mistress, holding herself as tightly as a taut bowstring, nods jerkily in agreement. And that’s it; she has successfully convinced Hallmaster Hou that she loathes Gongyi Xiao.

“If you do come forward to daddy to ask him to fire Gongyi-shixiong,” she says, “then I’ll ask him to please listen to you. I’ll tell him all about how Gongyi-shixiong broke my heart. I just thought you should know that.”

A *personal promise* from the Little Palace Mistress herself to throw her weight behind him and his attempt to remove a perpetual thorn in his side. Is it any wonder that Hallmaster Hou looks on the verge of salivating at the prospect?

“Palace Mistress, I thank you *very much* for telling me,” Hallmaster Hou says, eyes gleaming with excitement. “This is *most* interesting to know. You give me much reassurement. This Gongyi boy is lacking but, well, some people *are* charmed by him. A very superficial, deceitful sort of charm though, isn’t it? As you yourself have found. Any support at all is much appreciated.”

She doesn’t respond, only sitting there silently, her every muscle tense as a rock. *She can’t take much more of this,* Luo Binghe finds himself thinking, and so he steps forward before she can have the chance to fracture and snap.

“We’re so glad to hear that, Hallmaster,” Luo Binghe says, and Hallmaster Hou startles at his voice. It’s clear to see that he’d been so fixated on the Little Palace Mistress that he’d entirely forgotten Luo Binghe’s existence, let alone his presence.

Just according to plan. The Little Palace Mistress can be relied upon to manage to be the center of attention in any room she walks into, for good or ill. Usually ill, as a general rule, but there’s an exception for everything.

“You’re doing the sect a great favor,” Luo Binghe continues. “I can see that you’re very dedicated to the palace, taking matters into your own hands like this.”

“Yes, well--” Hallmaster Hou says, pleased and a little flustered by the effusive praise. “I *am* only doing my duty as a member of Huan Hua Palace. Anyone else would do the same.”

“Oh, not at all,” Luo Binge says silkily. “Because no one else *is,* are they? Only you, Hallmaster Hou. It’s quite admirable.”

“Well,” Hallmaster Hou says, smugly puffing up. “I suppose that’s true enough. Someone always has to be the person to take the first step.”

And then he turns back towards the Little Palace Mistress, who Luo Binghe can only hope has been taking this time to gather herself instead of winding up even tighter.

“Would you… like to stay for the meeting, Palace Mistress?” he asks courteously. “Another place setting could be set out--”

“No,” she says abruptly. “I’d-- be a distraction. You should all talk about this without me. Luo-shixiong can stay behind and let me know what decision is made.”

Good. She’s keeping her head enough to continue to follow the plan.

“Certainly, Palace Mistress,” Hallmaster Hou says, giving her a bow. It’s entirely appropriate for their respective stations, and yet Luo Binghe finds himself critically thinking that it should have been lower. “It is very wise of you to say as much.”

She gets up from the low table, turning abruptly and stalking towards the door. Luo Binghe only just manages to intercept her in time.

“Fu-shimei,” he says lightly, holding his bag out to her. “Could you please take care of this errand for me, now that I’m otherwise occupied?”

“Fine,” she says curtly, taking the bag from him. It’s significantly lighter than when he first entered the room.

The Little Palace Mistress leaves the office without another word, and then that’s it. Her part is over; now it’s up to him. He has to stop himself from breathing a sigh of relief. It had felt as if the Little Palace Mistress had been an inch away from snapping during that *entire* conversation. Luo Binghe hates to rely on other people; he would normally never hinge a plan on someone else’s ability, but this time it was a necessary component. The Little Palace Mistress came to him because she wanted to feel as if she’s actually *doing* something, after all. She *had to* be involved in the plan, as little as he liked it.

She didn’t let him down, though. She held up her end.

“I know I took some liberties, bringing her here to you,” Luo Binghe says, speaking to Hallmaster Hou. “But I felt that you would understand once she’d extended her offer to you. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Oh, yes, of course, of course,” Hallmaster Hou says, barely so much as glancing at Luo Binghe as his brow furrows in deep thought. Weighing what this newest development means for him and his scheme, adjusting the probability of success inside his mind. It must be a favorable equation, from how his lips curl into a grin as he thinks. “I understand perfectly. You did right, most definitely. Good work.”

“Thank you, Hallmaster,” Luo Binghe says demurely. “You won’t have to worry about me being a distraction during the meeting; I’ll stay silent and in the background. People can think me your assistant if they like.”

Then there’s a tapping at the door that visibly snaps the Hallmaster out of his reverie. A wide eyed look of urgency washes over his face and he hurriedly starts fussing over his robes, assuring himself that it’s all in order before he answers the door. Luo Binghe takes the opportunity to swiftly remove a small vial from an inner pocket in his robes while he’s distracted.

“Allow me,” he says, stepping forward, concealing the vial in his palm. “You shouldn’t have to answer the door yourself, Hallmaster.”

“I-- right, yes, good. Go-- go do that.”

“Yes, Hallmaster,” Luo Binghe replies mildly. As he passes the Hallmaster he deftly thumbs the cork off the vial, and with a single, sharp flick of his wrist he sprays the contents of the vial onto his robes. The Hallmaster, wrapped in the gilded layers of his most formal robes, doesn’t notice in the slightest.

Luo Binghe opens the door. There he finds a short, soft-figured, middle aged looking woman with kind eyes.

“Greetings, Shibo,” Luo Binghe says politely. “Are you here for the meeting with Hallmaster Hou?”

“I am indeed,” the kind eyed woman says with a little smile. “Tell him that Mao Huifang is here, won’t you?”

The recognition is instant, once she speaks her name. Luo Binghe has spent his time at Huan Hua Palace carefully learning the names of all the most important players in the sect, and this woman is one of them. Behind him, he can hear Hallmaster Hou’s breathing catch a little in his throat, before he forcibly clears it.

Mao Huifang is in charge of the Water Prison.

“Of course,” Luo Binghe says courteously, making way for her to enter. “Hallmaster Hou, Warden Mao has arrived.”

“Oh, please, no need to be so formal. Just call me Mao. I see I’m the first one to arrive! I hope I’m not too early?”

She goes ahead and makes pleasant chitchat, and Hallmaster Hou strives to answer her. Luo Binghe goes back to making himself a part of the background, waiting to answer the door for further arrivals.

He invited *Mao Huifang.* Shao Wenling had said that the Hallmaster was inviting peers *and* masters, and this woman very assuredly belonged in the latter category. Are the other guests going to be on her level?

Hallmaster Hou really has gone above and beyond, hasn't he?

Time passes, and more and more guests arrive. Luo Binghe recognizes the arrays expert in charge of overseeing the maze array that wraps around Huan Hua territory, the Bronze and Gold Hallmasters, the Gardens Mistress, the Patrol Master, and half a dozen more cultivators that he doesn't recognize on sight. Luo Binghe pays attention to how each one of them reacts to the Hallmaster as he greets them.

Once everyone has arrived, Hallmaster Hou clears his throat pointedly.

"Please, take your seats," he says. "We're all very busy people, so let's get down to business, shall we?"

"And what *is* our business, exactly?" the Bronze Hallmaster cuts in, looking wary. She's probably had to deal with Hallmaster Hou's proposals and suggestions quite often before now.

"I was *just* getting to that, thank you, Shimei," Hallmaster Hou responds. "I didn't want to be too detailed in my missives, as I thought it best that the matter be discussed properly in person."

Halfway through as he speaks, a small side door opens and Shao Wenling unobtrusively enters, holding a tray with a gently steaming teapot on it. She must have been keeping it heated close by, waiting for the moment that the murmuring would die down and Hallmaster Hou's voice would dominate. She keeps her head demurely bent, the tray steady - until she spots Luo Binghe standing against a wall, that is. Her eyes widen and her head shoots up, her grip on the tray wavering for just a moment.

What are you doing here, her face very clearly communicates. But the Hallmaster is speaking, and the meeting has officially begun; she has no opportunity to actually ask him. So he just gives her a reassuring smile, and then pointedly turns his focus back on Hallmaster Hou. In the end, she's forced to simply go along with it, quietly circling the table as she pours tea for each of the guests.

Shao Wenling is a pretty enough, elegant young woman. For a while Luo Binghe had considered that angle, had wondered if that had anything to do with why Hallmaster Hou had her as his assistant. But as far as he's been able to tell, if there's any admiration there then it's one sided. On *her* side, that is. He can hear it in the proud way she speaks of him, and see it in how she looks at him as if always seeking his approval, and how she tries her best to mimic his ever beloved Su Xiyan. And so he'd dismissed that line of attack as inconvenient and unproductive, crossing it off the metaphorical list.

Really though, there's *no* accounting for taste.

"Why?" the Patrol Master asks. "Is there a reason why this matter should be kept *furtive?"*

"Oh, gods," the Array Expert says. *"Please* don't tell me this is going to be a repeat of that awful incident when that idiot tried to start up a conspiracy that the Old Palace Master was going senile and needed to be deposed. What a *mess* that was."

"I believe he's *still* a guest of my prison," Mao Huifang remarks pleasantly.

"No!" Hallmaster Hou denies, aghast. He clears his throat, hurriedly composing himself. "No, that's-- of course not. I would never spread lies about or scheme against our Sect Leader. I merely thought it would be more-- more *tactful* for us to deal with this matter quietly. It wouldn't do for it to unnecessarily become a subject of public spectacle."

"Well, what is it then? Spit it out, Shidi," the Gold Hallmaster says.

"I only thought that it was about time for us to deal with the ongoing problem of Head Disciple Gongyi."

Shao Wenling, in the middle of pouring tea for the Gardens Mistress, flinches so that she spills onto the table. Ducking her head she quickly retrieves a handkerchief to mop it up and go back to pouring tea like nothing happened, but there's a certain tension to her shoulders now, a stiffness in her movements. This is a surprise to her, then; she really hadn't known that it was Gongyi Xiao her master had been planning on removing.

It's all well and good to tell jokes and laugh, but now that it's becoming *real*...

"The ongoing problem?" one of the masters asks. "Is there some issue I'm not aware of?"

"Or do you just mean his recent… *fumbles?"* the Gardens Mistress says. "He's the one the Old Palace Master decided to blame for the security breach in the Special Artifact Room, isn't he?"

"Well, he *was* the one put in charge of overseeing the security of that room," Hallmaster Hou says primly. "It isn't as if the decision was arbitrary; he *is* the one at fault."

"And so… what? You think something ought to be done about that? I thought he was *already* punished for that incident," the Gold Hallmaster says.

"Not nearly harshly enough," Hallmaster Hou sniffs. "The Old Palace Master is always lenient with that boy for his daughter's sake. But this meeting isn't about that incident; it's about a *pattern* of incidents. Surely anyone here who has been paying attention must have noticed that Head Disciple Gongyi has been underperforming and making more and more mistakes for some time now."

"Well, I certainly *haven't* been paying attention," the Array Expert says. "Like you said, I *am* a busy man. I have far too much to do in one day to spare time and attention for the Head Disciple. Hallmaster, is this truly an *important* issue?"

“Of course it is,” Hallmaster Hou snaps. “Gongyi Xiao is the Head Disciple of *Huan Hua Palace.* He represents us! He’s supposed to be an example of the finest cultivators we have to offer. By having some bumbling, overwhelmed *nobody* as our Head Disciple-- what exactly does that say about our sect? What message are we sending to everyone who *is* paying attention?”

The Bronze Hallmaster opens her mouth to say something - she’s frowning, an irritated expression on her face as if she wants to argue - but then Mao Huifang gently speaks first, and she instantly clacks her teeth shut in deference.

“A couple of my interrogators did have a *strange* interaction with that boy some weeks ago,” she remarks, a slight frown marring her soft features. “Dear little Dong Shu made quite an impassioned report about it; he was apparently fairly rude.”

Luo Binghe remembers the torn out teeth on the floor, fleshy roots trailing blood. A gold medallion held up in a white knuckled grip, and cold, stern eyes. *Leave. That is an order.*

Her comment was mild and understated, and yet it instantly shifts something in the air. Everyone is silent for a moment as they take it in, and what it means: *Mao Huifang* just said something to support Hallmaster Hou’s argument.

“That,” Hallmaster Hou says, his eyes lighting up with delight at the sudden shift in tone, “that is *exactly* the sort of thing I’m talking about, yes. *Thank you,* Warden Mao. Gongyi Xiao has a history of disrespecting his elders whenever it suits him! Is that the sort of person we really want as our Head Disciple?”

“... If he weren’t, what exactly are you proposing to *do* about it?” one of the masters asks reluctantly, which is when Luo Binghe decides that he’s let this meeting run along for long enough now. It’s time for an interruption.

Shao Wenling, who has made a full circuit of the table, has come to a stop by the last person to be served - the Bronze Hallmaster. Her tea bowl is absent, seemingly forgotten. It *hadn’t* been forgotten, of course; it had been in its rightful place when Luo Binghe had first entered the room. Shao Wenling dithers for a moment, flustered by her apparent mistake, teapot in hand. The Bronze Hallmaster flaps a dismissive, distracted hand at her, unwilling to tear her attention away from the meeting. As Shao Wenling looks around, as if she might find the stray tea bowl laying innocuously on the floor somewhere, simply misplaced, she happens to meet Luo Binghe’s eyes.

He looks down at the spot on the table where the tea bowl *should* be, raises his eyebrows in exaggerated alarm, and makes a point of looking around himself. Then he points to the cabinet he’s been quietly standing next to this whole time, mouthing at her: *in here?*

Before she can shake her head at him or really react at all, Luo Binghe turns to open up the cabinet.

Over two dozen empty bottles come noisily crashing onto the floor.

All conversation instantly ceases, attention swiveling onto him instead. He goes stiff with shock, shooting a horrified, wide eyed look onto the crowd. For a moment, it's a perfect frozen tableau: him crouched beside a messy heap of very distinctive bottles, all of them reeking of the exact sort of plum wine he'd caught Hallmaster Hou drinking during his visit. One of them even spins loudly on the floor, rolling to a slow stop.

"I'm-- *excuse me,"* Luo Binghe says, and rushes to start shoving bottles back into the cabinet. It's noisy, and he makes sure to fumble a few of them in his haste.

"That's-- how, how did those get there?" Hallmaster Hou says, genuinely shocked and bewildered.

"I don't know, Hallmaster," Luo Binghe says earnestly. "I'm so sorry for making a commotion-- please, just ignore this, I'll clean up the mess. This disciple apologizes for the distraction."

"Those aren't-- who put them in there?"

One of the masters clears their throat and looks away, awkwardly averting their gaze. Hallmaster Hou looks at them, and then at the rest of the table. Luo Binghe can *see* him realizing what they must be seeing and assuming.

"Those aren't mine," he says.

"... Of course, Shidi," the Gold Hallmaster says. He sounds more placating than genuine. Luo Binghe had noted him as being one of the people who had very clearly noticed the vial of plum wine that Luo Binghe had splashed onto Hallmaster Hou. His nose had scrunched up a little as he'd been greeted, a puzzled little furrow to his brow as he'd tried to place the scent.

Luo Binghe watches Hallmaster Hou open and close his mouth, struggling with how to handle such a response. An agreement that he can't argue with, even though it's so clearly hollow and disingenuous. How to explain something that he doesn't understand himself? How to do so in a way that doesn't make him look like a ridiculous, desperate liar, when the easy, obvious answer is so clearly that Hallmaster Hou likes to have himself a drink while working, and then hides the bottles away in this cabinet?

Luo Binghe closes the cabinet door loudly enough to snap the Hallmaster out of his frozen panic, and he can see the decision to try and simply soldier through this unexpected trouble settle on him. To force his way past the hindrance, continue on as if it hadn't happened, to keep the momentum of the meeting going even if he has to push a boulder uphill to do it now.

"My proposal," he says, his voice more forced than it had been, "is that you all give your *official* agreement that Gongyi Xiao should be replaced as Head Disciple. If we all stand united in this, the Old Palace Master must see sense."

"Must he?" the Gardens Mistress asks, after a just too long pause from the gathered masters. "It's not a guarantee. The Old Palace Master takes his own counsel first and foremost."

Luo Binghe stands up, and starts to slowly circle the edges of the room.

“And who exactly would we replace him *with?”* the Bronze Hallmaster cuts in before Hallmaster Hou even has the chance to answer the first question, leaning in across the table. “We went almost two *decades* without a Head Disciple after Su Xiyan’s passing. Do you really want to risk going back to that sort of instability? An imperfect Head Disciple is better than no Head Disciple at all. We’re *lucky* that Gongyi Xiao caught the Old Palace Master’s eye. Let us not forget that so hastily.”

They’re back to picking at the edges of everything he says now, the tides shifting again. Good. The Bronze Hallmaster especially seems to be critical of him. A shame that she appears to be the least important person at the table.

“Gongyi Xiao did not catch the Old Palace Master’s eye because he is so unique, so *special* that he managed to break through where no one else could. He was simply the person who happened to be there when the fog of his grief finally started to lift. Our Sect Leader’s mourning period is over now; he will find a replacement for Gongyi Xiao *far* more easily than he found one for Su Xiyan - which is only reasonable, with how truly exceptional *she* was.”

Luo Binghe reaches Shao Wenling, who is standing unobtrusively against a wall. Her expression is schooled into blankness, but her shoulders are hunched. Her eyes flit towards him as he approaches her.

“And who would present this proposal to the Old Palace Master?” the Patrol Master asks. “You?”

“That is the plan, yes,” Hallmaster Hou says, with great dignity. “It’s my idea, so I would of course be obliged to be the face of it.”

“But with all of our names attached to it,” the Bronze Hallmaster mutters.

Leaning discreetly in towards Shao Wenling, he whispers to her: *“Is Hallmaster Hou drunk again?”*

He whispers, but he whispers in the way of a young disciple who hasn’t learned yet just exactly how sharp a trained cultivator’s hearing is. In other words, *just* loudly enough for anyone who’s listening to hear.

Shao Wenling immediately notices this, he can tell from the way her eyes go wide and round with horror. “Quiet--!” she hisses, and there’s an aborted movement like she had to stop herself from outright pressing a hand over his mouth. She shoots a panicked glance at the table - no one is watching them, but in a very *deliberate* sort of way - and then quietly shushes him.

It’s the perfect reaction, honestly. He couldn’t have asked for better. Luo Binghe goes obligingly silent, and pretends not to notice how Hallmaster Hou is clenching his jaw now. Likely the only reason he hasn’t outright ejected Luo Binghe from the room is because it would mean that he’d have to acknowledge what just happened.

He looks around at the table, a growing frantic, desperate light in his eyes, before he blurts out: “Our names won’t be the only ones attached to this request, of course.”

Oh?

“You already have someone else’s agreement?” the Patrol Master asks, before throwing a dubious look across the room. His thoughts are clear to see on his face: If it isn’t one of the people already in this room, then are they really important enough to *matter?* “Well, who is it then?”

“The Little Palace Mistress,” Hallmaster Hou says.

Ahh. Alright, then. He’s decided to try and play *that* card publically. He really is desperate, scrambling; he makes Luo Binghe think of a man refusing to let go of his weapon in a fight even when it’s gotten stuck, grabbed. Instead of changing strategies or retreating he’s just doubling down, escalating.

The reaction from the room is immediate.

“You must be joking,” the Bronze Hallmaster exclaims, shocked into frankness.

“You’ve attained *her* support in demoting Gongyi Xiao? Are you certain, Hallmaster?” the Array Expert asks incredulously.

“Gods, can you imagine the spectacle she’d make if anyone tried to remove him?” the Patrol Master asks. “Did you actually ask her *directly,* Shidi? There could be a misunderstanding.”

Hallmaster Hou raises one quelling hand into the air. There’s an air of harried triumph to him, like he’s only just managed to draw a winning card at the edge of defeat.

“There is no possibility of a misunderstanding,” he assures them all. “I spoke to her face to face. *She* came to *me,* in fact - just before this meeting. Her relationship with Gongyi Xiao has soured, and she finally sees him as he truly is. She pledged her support to this effort. Disciple Luo here can verify; he was present at the time.”

All attention turns onto him. It’s Mao Huifang who speaks, looking very much like she’s asking a child about their drawing, all kindly curiosity and attention: “Is this true, Shizhi?”

“Ah,” Luo Binghe says uncomfortably. And, “well.”

There’s a beat. All of Hallmaster Hou’s smugness and glee drains out of him as he waits for the confirmation that he had been fully expecting to be supplied.

“Just tell her the truth,” he finally snaps, looking edgy and impatient. “The Little Palace Mistress agreed that Gongyi Xiao should be removed as Head Disciple. You saw. *Tell them.”*

“Perhaps,” Luo Binghe says gently, carefully, “perhaps Hallmaster Hou is… confused?”

“What?” Hallmaster Hou asks. “I’m-- no, I *am not.* I know what happened! She came into my office and *told me* that she’d support me. Where could the confusion possibly be?”

Luo Binghe looks Hallmaster Hou directly in the eye and says: “She didn’t say that. You asked the Little Palace Mistress for support, and she denied it.”

It’s a bold, audacious move. It’s permanently burning a bridge, it’s making an enemy. It’s making what’s happening obvious to the Hallmaster. But, at the same time, it’s a *winning* move. And Luo Binghe thinks he can handle one self important hallmaster with a grudge.

“You’re lying,” Hallmaster Hou says. He looks at the table, and then points at Luo Binghe accusingly. “He’s *lying!* She told me that she’d urge her father to agree--”

“She said that she’d tell the Old Palace Master to ignore you completely. Please, Hallmaster, what are you doing? You can’t tell these sorts of lies; all anyone would have to do to unveil them is to ask the Little Palace Mistress about it.” And then Luo Binghe pauses, tilts his head. “Should I bring her, Hallmaster? Then she could tell us all exactly what she said herself.”

Hallmaster Hou opens his mouth - and then closes it. Luo Binghe watches the realization wash over him: that everyone who knows anything about the Little Palace Mistress would be far more inclined to believe that she would shield Gongyi Xiao, not turn against him; and that his defense rests entirely on her word. And if she isn’t honest…

This is the second part of the Little Palace Mistress’ role in their plan: to fiercely deny absolutely everything. The original plan had been to do something like this in front of the Old Palace Master when Hallmaster Hou came to make his complaint to him. Is this better or worse?

“Hallmaster?” Luo Binghe asks. “Should I bring her?”

“That’s… you, you don’t--” Hallmaster Hou chokes out, blanching a sickly white. “You shouldn’t bother her--”

Mao Huifang stands up. She does so calmly, without much fanfare, and simply says, “pardon me.”

And then she just leaves. No explanation given, no apology. Hallmaster Hou reaches a hand into the air after her helplessly, stammering, but he doesn’t actually dare try to stop her. And that’s it; the final nail in the coffin of this meeting.

“This is all far too… *conspiratorial* for my liking,” the Patrol Master says. “Head Disciple Gongyi is simply going through a rough patch. If he really isn’t good enough for the position, then I’m sure that the Old Palace Master will take care of the matter in his own time. He’s a wise man.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” the Gold Hallmaster chimes in eagerly, getting up from the table. “Really, is this any of *our* business to get mixed up in?”

“I certainly don’t have the time for it,” the Array Expert says. “I have much more important, urgent matters to see to. If you’re really in such a hurry to remove Head Disciple Gongyi then you should take care of the matter yourself, Shidi.”

“Without wasting *our* time,” the Bronze Hallmaster says with a vindictive triumph.

One by one, each of the present masters stand up and leave. In no time at all, the room has been emptied of everyone but Luo Binghe, Shao Wenling, and Hallmaster Hou.

“You,” Hallmaster Hou says, looking at Luo Binghe. “How could you? Do you-- do you have *any* idea what you’ve just done to me?”

“Shizun--” Shao Wenling says, sounding pained. He cuts her off with a sharp movement of his arm, not even looking at her.

“What I’ve done to you?” Luo Binghe asks. “What you’ve done to yourself, you mean. This meeting, the proposal - that was all your bright idea, wasn’t it?”

“You’re a deceitful little *interloper,”* Hallmaster Hou spits, looking wild eyed and pale, with two red spots on his cheeks. “What is this, sabotage from Cang Qiong Mountain Sect? Is *that* why you’re here? They sent you. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Hallmaster,” Luo Binghe says, and he makes his voice go pityingly condescending. “Perhaps you should go and rest; you’re making some fantastic accusations.”

“You’ve *ruined* me!” Hallmaster Hou shouts abruptly, so that Shao Wenling flinches back from where she’d been tentatively approaching him. “Discredited me, *destroyed* my credibility in the eyes of my peers-- you selfish, foolish child, can you even understand what you’ve done?”

“It’s all very well for you to blame your mistakes on me. As a respectful and filial disciple, I’ll dutifully allow you to think whatever you like if it makes you feel better. But really,” he says, and he narrows his eyes, “weren’t you planning on doing *worse* to Gongyi Xiao today? Turnabout is fair play, Hallmaster. You shouldn’t do to others what you wouldn’t be willing to suffer yourself.”

“Get out,” Hallmaster Hou says. “Get *out!* If I ever see you again, I’ll have you exiled from Huan Hua Palace!”

“I don’t believe,” Luo Binghe says lightly, “that you have the authority to make such a promise, Hallmaster.”

And he leaves.

Luo Binghe’s skin prickles with giddy excitement, his veins humming with a smug satisfaction. It’s always, of course, gratifying seeing a plan come off flawlessly. But this time there’s something *thrilling* about it, leaving him brimming over with a sense of victory that leaves him feeling heady, triumphant.

It is in this unusual celebratory mood that Luo Binghe tracks down the Little Palace Mistress after he leaves Hallmaster Hou’s office. He finds her waiting for him in his room, as they’d agreed beforehand.

"Well?" she demands the second he walks in, having clearly been in the middle of pacing a hole in his floor. She looks restless and edgy, and he's a little surprised to see that she hasn't torn one of his pillows or something to pieces in her agitation. Not being able to be in the meeting room, to just have to stand aside and *wait,* has clearly grated on her nerves horribly. "How did it go? Did it work? Are they going to ask daddy to get rid of Gongyi-shixiong? Tell me already!"

"Fu-shimei would do well to let me *get a word in,"* Luo Binghe says, but he can't bring himself to feel truly irritated with her. He still feels bubbly with accomplishment. "It worked *beautifully."*

He goes on to regale her with what happened. She leans in closer and closer as he talks, looking like she wants to pry every little detail out of him all at once with her bare hands instead of having to wait for his slow, inconvenient mouth to speak them. It begins to feel less like telling a story, and more like he's giving an after mission report.

"... and it was all thanks to you, of course," he finishes, flattering her.

"I barely did anything," the Little Palace Mistress says, automatically rejecting the flattery.

"Maybe you didn't do *much,"* Luo Binghe grants. "But what you *did* do was absolutely essential. This is a plan that only could have worked with you as a partner. Tang-shidi or Han-shimei would never have been able to fulfill your role."

There's a flicker of confusion across her face, which Luo Binghe immediately parses as *who are these irrelevant people, I've never even* heard *these names before.*

"What I'm saying is," Luo Binghe says, "that even if it doesn't *feel* like you did a lot, this plan never would have worked without you. You were irreplaceable."

He isn't even lying. He *made* the plan so that she would be irreplaceable in it, of course, but she doesn't need to know that.

"So," the Little Palace Mistress says, and she looks… oddly disappointed. "Is that it?"

"... Yes?" Luo Binghe says. "What, would you like a medal? That rather subverts the point of a *subtle* plan of sabotage."

"No, that's not what--" she says, and then cuts herself off with an inarticulate noise of frustration. She visibly searches for words, and he gives her the time to find them.

"I just meant," she starts again, *"now* what?"

"Well," Luo Binghe says, "now we congratulate ourselves on a job well done, I suppose. Gongyi-shixiong won't be getting fired or reprimanded, or whatever it is that might have happened if Hallmaster Hou had gone through with his plans. He'll likely hold a grudge against all three of us, so we'll have to keep that in mind when interacting with him, but I'm not too worried. None of us are under his direct authority, and his connections and reputation just took quite a hit. He's not a serious threat."

“No,” the Little Palace Mistress says. “No, I’m not worried about *him.* It’s just-- what have we actually done? Nothing’s *changed.”*

“That was the point. We were trying to *stop* something from changing; the fact that things remain the same means that we won.”

“But the way things are is *trash,”* she snaps. “People are still making fun of Gongyi-shixiong, they’re disrespecting him, they’re blaming him for things that aren’t even his fault! That’s all the *same!”*

She isn’t wrong. They prevented a grievous move from being made against Gongyi Xiao today, but the overall situation remains the same. That was the entire point; to placate and bribe the Little Palace Mistress with a token effort, something that *feels* substantial and meaningful without actually changing the eventual end result at all. A hollow effort.

Luo Binghe’s giddy satisfaction begins to ebb.

“What,” he says, “were you expecting to change the attitudes of the entire sect with one little trick? The world isn’t that easy, Fu-shimei.”

“Don’t give me that shit,” she throws at him. “If you go on another lecture about how I don’t understand how unfair the world is I’m going to--”

She reaches for her whip. Once again, her hand meets nothing but empty air. It’s enough to make her break her verbal stride, but when she starts again she sounds twice as angry.

“We haven’t done *enough,”* she says. *“I* haven’t done enough! How am I supposed to prove to Gongyi-shixiong that I’m not just a burden, that I really do love--”

She catches herself, but it’s too late. Her eyes are bright and shiny, her chest heaving, her face flushed with upset. She’s never looked more like the delicate, fragile maiden that she dresses herself as.

Luo Binghe recognizes his own words in her mouth. From the dream, beneath the mask of Gongyi Xiao, the person she trusts most in the whole world - just so he could slip his knife underneath her lowered defenses. A dishonorable, cheating low blow.

It must be some higher sense of manipulation or cunning that moves Luo Binghe to speak, because the words well up and out of him without planning, without deliberation.

“... Gongyi-shixiong is not so mercenary,” Luo Binghe says. He thinks of young little Xie Ruonlan with her tear stained cheeks, puppy fat still clinging to the edges of her, sheltered underneath Gongyi Xiao’s comforting arm. “He doesn’t love others for how they benefit him. Does he?”

The Little Palace Mistress gulps down air, looking like she’s viciously holding herself back from the very edge of letting her tears fall.

“No,” she says, and she has to make her voice small to control it. “He doesn’t. But--”

But. This spoiled and pampered princess, so used to being catered and cowed to her entire life that she takes it entirely for granted - she wants to finally do something for someone, instead of just demanding something be done for her. She wants to do something for *Gongyi Xiao.* To help him, to show him just how much he means to her. She wants it so badly that it's tearing her apart on the inside.

"You *have* helped him today," Luo Binghe says. "And you'd help him more, if you'd just listen to my advice. *Be there for him."*

"If I'm with him," the Little Palace Mistress says, "then I'll see the way people look at him, or hear how they talk to him. And then I'll-- make him look bad."

"Be with him alone, then," Luo Binghe says. "Or learn how to ignore people who don't matter."

"I don't know how to do that," she says. "They're like buzzing flies, or whining mosquitos. Grating and noisy and always *bothering* him. I just want to *flatten* them so they'll shut up and go away."

"It's easy," Luo Binghe says. "Just imagine that every time they open their mouths, nothing but a broken flute sound comes out."

A little half-laugh trips out of her, and he smiles. She looks almost surprised by herself, before visibly trying to shake it off, like it's wrong for her to be anything but miserable right now.

"I'll just keep leaving my whip in my room," she says, a grudging reluctance in her voice. Her hand makes an aborted twitch, as if to reach for a weapon that isn't there. It isn't even an aggressive gesture this time, just instinctively seeking it out to reassure herself. "That way I can't be tempted. The worst I'll be able to do is hit someone."

Luo Binghe remembers that gut punch she dealt him during their spar at the Peach Orchard. She had honestly *winded* him.

"Don't," Luo Binghe says. "He wouldn't want you to make yourself smaller for him."

Luo Binghe doesn't want it, at least. She's brash and bold and loud and shameless, and it causes so many problems, is downright self sabotaging at times. *But* - but, at the same time - there's something almost admirable about it. Her uncompromising honesty; her bravery; her stubborn loyalty and devotion. She's refreshing. He'd hate to see her cut off pieces of herself just to turn into a sweet, compliant flower; there are so many of those in the world already.

She gives him an irritated, exasperated look.

"Would you at least stop contradicting yourself?" she asks him sourly. "Stop making messes, stop starting fights - except *do* keep your whip on you, *do* stand your ground. Which is it?"

"Those are *not* mutually exclusive things," Luo Binghe points out, half mocking and half fond. What a ridiculous woman.

"How?" the Little Palace Mistress demands.

He's tempted to tease her, provoke her into snapping and shoving at him - and then the thought occurs to him: now would be a good time to escalate. To take a step closer to her, to rest a hand on her waist, her arm. To murmur something romantic to her in a soft voice, all suave charm. *Keep your whip. What is a rose without its thorns?*

Something stops him, though. It just-- feels wrong. It's not the right move, not right now. He can't explain why, he just *knows* it to be so. Having learned to trust his instincts, Luo Binghe lets the opportunity pass him by.

"I don't think that leaving your whip behind is necessary," Luo Binghe says instead, and he continues as he sees her open her mouth to argue with him. "But if you're going to *insist* on it, then at the very least - here."

Reaching into his sleeve, he casually removes a hidden knife.

"What-- why do you have *that* on you?" the Little Palace Mistress asks him. "Don't you have a sword? What, do you think you're an assassin?"

"Of course not," Luo Binghe says, as if he's never assassinated anyone before in his life. "It's just good to be cautious and prepared. Who knows what might happen?"

"When is a little knife going to be better than your own spiritual weapon?" she asks critically.

"When I've been disarmed and tied up with Immortal Binding Cable," Luo Binghe replies sweetly.

That had been a harsh lesson learned during his first early days in the demon courts. He had grown used to only fighting mindless, bestial opponents in the Abyss and had been taken badly off guard by an enemy that could actually *plan* against him, that had resources besides sheer strength and speed. He'd had to break his own wrists and partially deglove his hands just to get out of those cables, in the end. They had healed in only minutes, of course, but still. He prefers to avoid that sort of thing if possible. It would have been nice to have had a knife up his sleeve just then.

Now, he slides the sheath off the knife, revealing a sharp, cold metal gleam. And then he neatly snaps the wicked blade off the handle with his hands and a little qi, before sliding the stump of a hilt back into the sheath and holding it out to the Little Palace Mistress, sans blade.

She looks down at it, not taking it from his outstretched hands.

"What is this?" she asks, frowning. "Some sort of joke? Because I don't--"

"It's not a joke, Fu-shimei," Luo Binghe says with forced patience. "You said yourself that you don't want to take your whip with you because you don't think you could resist

temptation, right? Well then, take this instead. Something for you to grab onto menacingly whenever you feel like it, without actually having the option to wield it."

"Oh," she says. She looks at the broken knife again, this time like she's reevaluating it, and then she accepts it. She wraps her fingers around the hilt almost experimentally, as if testing it.

"I don't mean it as a permanent solution," Luo Binghe says. "Just until you trust yourself with your whip again. This is only a temporary measure, something for you to practice with. It makes you feel bad not to have a weapon on you, doesn't it? Even when you're within the heart of the palace."

I feel the same way, he doesn't say.

Her eyes meet his. She opens her mouth, closes it. Inhales deeply, scrunches up her nose as if she's tasted something distasteful. Spits out: "Thank you," quick and rushed like she wants to get it over with as fast as possible.

Luo Binghe can't help but laugh, and she immediately looks like she wishes the knife she's holding could actually cut him.

"Grimacing like you're being made to touch something dirty every time you thank someone spoils it a little, Fu-shimei," he says, grinning and amused.

"You'd grimace too if you had to thank *you* for anything!" she snaps at him hotly. She shoves the sheathed not-knife into some hidden inner pocket with brusque movements, clearly nettled by his reaction.

"You're *welcome,* Fu-shimei," he says with mocking sincerity. She makes a noise like an infuriated cat, and then grabs the collar of his robes like she intends to shake him by it. He allows it, already thinking about how he's going to use the grip against her to capture and wrench at her wrist--

Luo Binghe's door, the lock still broken and useless, slides open to reveal Gongyi Xiao.

They look at Gongyi Xiao, framed by the doorway. Gongyi Xiao looks at them, standing closely to each other alone in Luo Binghe's quarters, the Little Palace Mistress clutching at the collar of Luo Binghe's robes. If the tableau weren't obviously damning and suggestive enough all on its own, then it would be clear just from the way Gongyi Xiao's face drops away into blankness as soon as he lays eyes on them.

Absurdly, the first thing that Luo Binghe thinks is: *it's not what it looks like.*

The second thing: *I didn't even plan this.*

"Ah," Gongyi Xiao says, his delivery only slightly wooden. "I apologize for interrupting. I tapped on the door, but…"

The Little Palace Mistress lets go of Luo Binghe. For a moment he thinks she's about to burst out that it's a misunderstanding, but then he looks at her and realizes that she hasn't even

noticed any assumptions being made. The situation is flying completely over her head.

“Gongyi-shixiong, what are you doing here?” she asks.

Gongyi Xiao holds up a scroll. “Master Song told me to ask Luo-shidi to handle this for him. It’s a time sensitive matter, so I thought it best that I seek him out.”

The insult to Gongyi Xiao is immediately obvious. Not trusting him to handle it himself, and instead using him as a glorified *messenger* - even the Little Palace Mistress understands, her breath catching with sudden fury. Her face spasms with a mix of anger and *guilt,* and Luo Binghe understands that too. A direct example of just how little has been changed today, served to her on a platter as if to mock her efforts.

“I have to go,” she says tightly.

“Fu-shimei--” Gongyi Xiao starts, but she’s too upset to listen even to him. She charges straight past him, out the door and away from them both. Luo Binghe would be worried that she’s off to hunt Master Song down if there were any chance of her actually knowing who that is.

And just like that, the two of them are alone together.

That hasn’t happened often, lately. Gongyi Xiao avoids him. He does this subtly and politely, retaining plausible deniability at all times, but Luo Binghe *notices* how there always happens to be other people around whenever they meet, and if not then how quickly Gongyi Xiao finds an excuse to leave. This is an exception.

Gongyi Xiao looks after her as if he wants to follow her - but in the end he turns back to Luo Binghe, stepping closer.

“Here,” he says, handing over the scroll. “Master Song stressed that it was *quite* urgent - although he always does that, so I suppose you ought to just use your best judgment.”

“Thank you, Gongyi-shixiong,” Luo Binghe says, accepting it. Without even thinking about it, he closely analyzes every single little movement that Gongyi Xiao makes. The shift of his facial expressions, the flicker of his eyes, the motion of his hands. *Do you remember?* he wonders.

He shouldn’t. Luo Binghe has been careful with Gongyi Xiao’s dreams, even if he’s sometimes… lost track of himself. Either way, Gongyi Xiao gives no indication that he does so.

He does seem to be hesitating over something, though. Finally, he seems to find the right words to speak.

“You and Fu-shimei have been getting closer to each other,” he says carefully.

Ah, Luo Binghe thinks. So he’s going to acknowledge it. He’s almost surprised by that.

“We have,” Luo Binghe says, and he summons his perfect, practiced smile. “She’s a very lovely woman.”

“She is,” Gongyi Xiao agrees sincerely, likely the only person in the entire sect to do so. “I-- I was surprised by that, actually. When I was first getting to know her myself, I mean. I had this… predetermined idea of what she was like, from what I’d already heard about her. But then I realized that this was an unfair, shallow way to think of someone. How could secondhand words do justice to a real human being? She-- she’s so much *more* than others would say she is. She has hidden depths, sides of herself she doesn’t show to just anyone. *Potential.”*

Gongyi Xiao’s words have an earnest quality to them, like this is something he’s been thinking about for some time, wrestling with how to articulate a concept that’s now bursting out of him before he’s finished the process. This is, Luo Binghe realizes, an interaction between them that is going to be *genuine.*

“She’s a really special person, and *not* just because she’s the Old Palace Master’s daughter,” Gongyi Xiao says, growing more heated as he speaks. “And people don’t see that, and they don’t appreciate it. She-- she can be a tough person to get to know, so they don’t try to see past what’s on the surface. They don’t give her a chance, and she’s given up on giving other people chances too. I underestimated just how much she’d come to matter to me.”

This, then, will be the part where he’ll tell Luo Binghe to back off, to mind his own business. Perhaps he’ll be polite about it, asking him to leave her be instead of demanding it. And Luo Binghe will silkily agree, and then continue on just as he already has been. So what if he’s coming between two people who truly love each other, who *deserve* each other? Luo Binghe has done far worse to get what he needs. *Far* worse.

“Whoever ends up with her,” Gongyi Xiao continues, “is going to be a very lucky person. They should be someone who’s going to appreciate her. She shouldn’t just be some-- some meaningless conquest in a harem or something. She’s not a prize to be won as a matter of pride, a tool to get close to her father. I *know* she’s spoiled and aggressive, but she still deserves a genuine connection; someone who’s going to realize just how special she is.”

And that person is me, Gongyi Xiao will say.

“Do you understand?” Gongyi Xiao asks him, looking into his eyes intently. “You wouldn’t take her for granted, right?”

Luo Binghe - blinks.

Gongyi Xiao continues to look at him expectantly, like he’s really waiting for an answer. As if-- as if he’s waiting for *reassurance* from Luo Binghe. A promise to treasure the Little Palace Mistress for the rest of his days.

Luo Binghe opens his mouth--

--and he wants to howl *what is wrong with you, what the FUCK is the matter with you, why do you keep doing this, why do you keep surrendering without even a fight, why do you give*

up right from the start, don't you care? don't you want to keep the things you love? why are you giving them all to ME? what's going to be left for you?--

--and he says, "Oh, it's really not like that between us, Gongyi-shixiong. You don't need to worry."

Gongyi Xiao looks at him, and Luo Binghe thinks he catches just the faintest hint of disappointment before his expression shutters closed and blank again.

The genuine interaction is over now.

"I see," Gongyi Xiao says. "My apologies for making assumptions, Luo-shidi."

"I won't hold it against you," Luo Binghe says kindly.

"My thanks. I should stop taking up your time and leave you to your work. Thank you again for indulging your shixiong and his baseless worries."

And with that, Gongyi Xiao takes his leave.

Luo Binghe stands there for exactly ten seconds, clutching the delivered scroll in his hands, before he follows him. He can't explain why. It's a whim, gut feeling, *instincts.* And Luo Binghe listens to his instincts.

He moves swiftly and silently, like the stalking predator he learned to be in the Eternal Abyss. He prowls through the golden and gilded halls of the palace like they're dark, jagged rocks, and Gongyi Xiao doesn't notice him in the slightest. He moves with purpose himself, like a man with a destination that he wants to be at *now.* Luo Binghe half wonders where exactly he's going, and half already knows.

Gongyi Xiao's path takes him deeper inside the palace, towards the core of it where not just anyone can go. He's the Head Disciple, and so no one stops him. Luo Binghe himself has to employ tricks and subterfuge to continue to follow him unhindered and unseen, but he manages. Finally, Gongyi Xiao stops before a particular residential door, tapping on it discreetly. He opens it just a crack, just enough to let his voice slip inside: "Fu-shimei, may I come in?"

There's a beat of drawn out silence, and then a mumbled, "yes."

Gongyi Xiao enters. Luo Binghe, darting down the hall as soon as Gongyi Xiao starts to slip into the room, manages to catch the edge of the door just at the last moment, stopping it from closing entirely. He waits for a moment, but all he hears is Gongyi Xiao continuing to walk into the room. He hasn't been noticed.

The Little Palace Mistress, a note of defensiveness in her voice: "I wasn't ruining my room."

Luo Binghe situates himself at the barely open crack of the door, peering inside. He's ready to retreat the very moment it seems that attention might be turned his way, and his ears are sharpened for any movement from either end of the hallway. But it isn't necessary; Gongyi

Xiao and the Little Palace Mistress' attention are fully fixed on each other. Luo Binghe could probably even fully sneak into the room itself, and he still wouldn't be noticed.

The Little Palace Mistress was right; her room *doesn't* look ruined. Nothing is broken or torn. All the sheets are pulled off her bed and pillows are strewn across the room as if she's been throwing them at the walls, and she's sitting on the floor clutching at her whip, but nothing is permanently broken. It can all be put back in place by herself as if nothing happened at all - although Luo Binghe doubts that she knows how to make her own bed the same expert way that the servants do.

Her bedroom really isn't that different from the way it was in the dream: unreasonably large and absurdly opulent. Luo Binghe can't help but let his gaze be drawn towards the wardrobe where he'd found her sitting that night, but it's closed.

"That's nice," Gongyi Xiao says. "It is *your* room, after all. Wrecking it would be a bit like tearing up your own dress because someone else insulted you. What's the point?"

"Stopping myself from tearing up the *other* person's dress," the Little Palace Mistress answers.

"Ah," he says. "Well, you've got me there. If it's just those two options, then you're probably picking the better one. Although if it were me, I'd find a way to trick that other person into tearing up their own dress."

"No, you wouldn't. You'd compliment their dress so they'd feel guilty about being mean to you in the first place," the Little Palace Mistress retorts.

"Well," Gongyi Xiao says, "if that's a *possibility,* then why not try it? That way, everyone's happy."

The Little Palace Mistress snorts. "I don't want everyone to be happy. Some people deserve to be made miserable."

Gongyi Xiao sits down next to her on the floor. The Little Palace Mistress looks down at her whip in her lap, her hands tightening around the coils, avoiding the barbs by sheer familiarity.

"I really don't resent the rest of the sect for… what's going on," he says. "Some things can't be helped."

She makes a noise of profound offense. *"Can't be helped?* This isn't a storm! They're *choosing* to be cruel to you! They could stop at any moment."

"It's not that simple," Gongyi Xiao disagrees. "Popular opinion is like the current - it can be difficult to stand against it instead of being swept up along with everyone else. The stronger it is, the more people get dragged in. If everyone but you agrees about something, then it's next to impossible to assume anything but that you're the one in the wrong. And who wants to be wrong?"

"I don't think something just because everyone else does," the Little Palace Mistress says disdainfully. "Those people are just weak, or stupid. If I'm the only correct person in the sect - in the whole *world* - then I won't pretend like I'm not for their sakes."

Gongyi Xiao looks at her, and there's nothing blank and perfect about his face at all. His eyes are soft and tender, a warm smile on his mouth.

"I know you wouldn't," he says fondly. "But Fu-shimei, you should keep in mind that not everyone is as brave and strong as you. Please, have some patience for your lessers."

She looks back at him, and there's something raw and wounded in her face as she sees the warmth in his eyes. She looks like she's been struck.

"We don't have to get married!" bursts out of her, abrupt and too loud so that Gongyi Xiao leans back from her, his eyes wide.

"Ah-- what?" he asks, bewildered.

"We don't have to get married," she repeats, less of a shout this time. Her knuckles are white around her coiled whip. "Just because I want to. I know-- I know we've never talked about it, but that's because we never had to. Everyone else always said it for us. Daddy and the whole-- the *whole* sect. That we might as well be engaged, everyone expecting us to… I really liked that people said that, that they thought that about us. I've always wanted to marry you, Gongyi-shixiong."

Gongyi Xiao looks half shocked, half flustered. His face is going pink, his eyes wide.

"Always," the Little Palace Mistress goes on, even more red faced herself - but there's a fierce determination to her features, like she intends to say what she has to say no matter what. "The more I got to know you, the more I wanted it. And-- and you knew. It was obvious, I didn't hide it. Why would I? We'd get married one day, after all. Everyone said so, and I-- I always get what I want. So long as I want it, it happens.

"But you're not… you're not a dress or jewelry or flowers. You're not a thing, not *my* thing. I can't have you just because I want you, without even asking. Everyone in the whole sect has always said we're going to get married - except for you. You've never said it even once. You don't want to marry me, do you?"

Always so unpredictably, unexpectedly perceptive.

"I…" Gongyi Xiao says, caught off guard. "That's-- anyone would be lucky to marry you, Fu-shimei. I just don't think-- that is, *we're* not meant to--"

The Little Palace Mistress sets her jaw, and she says, "that's fine. I accept it. If you don't want to, then-- then it's not going to happen. Even if *I* want it. I'll get over it - or I'll learn to live with it."

She sounds resolute, decided. She sounds like saying these words is the hardest thing she's ever had to do. She sounds like she means it.

She's the Little Palace Mistress. Odds are, if she really pushed, if she *really* wanted to marry Gongyi Xiao then she could force it. She could strongarm him into it, using her position and her pull against him. Perhaps she wouldn't even have to go that far. She could just sit back and let the simple force of assumption and expectation lead things to their natural conclusion.

She isn't going to, though. She's choosing not to.

You really listened to me, Luo Binghe realizes. He had intended for his words in the dream to cut at her, to push her away from Gongyi Xiao. Instead, she's doing *this* with them.

"... You'll find someone better," Gongyi Xiao says, his entire frame softening into something careful and tender. "The most incredible man in the world will ask you to marry him someday, and you won't even remember me."

"Is that supposed to be reassurance?" the Little Palace Mistress asks him. "That's exactly what I *don't* want to happen. Why do you think I want to marry you? I don't want us to forget each other, to drift apart. I want a promise that I'll never lose you; to be able to spend the rest of my life with you. But you don't feel the same--"

"I want that too," Gongyi Xiao says - and then his eyes widen, like he hadn't meant to say that. "I-- I mean… Fu-shimei, you're the best friend I've ever had. We don't have to be married to make a promise like that."

Her eyes brighten, eager and hungry.

"Do you mean it?" she breathes. "Do you promise never to leave me?"

"I…" Gongyi Xiao hesitates. Swallows. Looks her directly in the eyes, and carefully says: "If we ever drift apart, if we separate - then it will only be because there was nothing I could do to stop it in the first place."

And she smiles, warm and golden like the sun. One of her hands leaves her whip to grasp his hand, squeezing it.

"Then if neither of us wants to leave each other, we'll be together forever," she says happily, like she can't even conceive of a world unfair enough to tear them unwillingly apart from each other.

Gongyi Xiao leans into her, his arms curling around her. It hides his face from her view when he says, "right."

The Little Palace Mistress hugs him tightly, fervently, and Gongyi Xiao doesn't protest or move to break the embrace. He looks like he's willing to sit there and let her hold him for as long as she desires, however long that may be.

Silently, Luo Binghe moves away from the crack in the door and starts to make his way down the hall, away from the two of them. There's nothing more of use for him to see or overhear. Nothing of strategic value, no actionable knowledge, no useful information to be gleaned.

There’s nothing for him here at all.

Tea Visit

Chapter Summary

> “We just wanted to congratulate you, Gongyi-shixiong,” Qin Wanyue says.

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is 3.6k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s a beautiful day. The sky is a sweet blue, the breeze warm and fresh, all the flowers at their most vibrant, and the sun shines golden upon the palace.

“Gongyi-shixiong!”

Gongyi Xiao turns towards the call just in time to catch Qin Wanrong as she throws her arms around him affectionately.

“Wanrong-shimei!” he scolds automatically. “Don’t be so forward.”

“I’m just being friendly,” Qin Wanrong pouts, playfully resisting as Gongyi Xiao tries to remove her from himself. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Plenty,” Qin Wanyue says, approaching from behind her sister. “It was bad enough when you used to do this sort of thing before, A-Rong, but now that Gongyi-shixiong’s a married man it’s even worse. Do you really want to try and play second wife to the Little Palace Mistress?”

“Married--” Gongyi Xiao starts, and then stops as if he’s suddenly lost the train of his thought. Confused over his own confusion.

“Fine,” Qin Wanrong grumbles, and she releases Gongyi Xiao to cross her arms. “As if she’d even *allow* any other wives - or even a measly concubine! She’s so possessive, Gongyi-shixiong, I don’t know *how* you stand her.”

“She’s perfectly good company,” Gongyi Xiao protests automatically. “She’s just… *passionate.”*

“That’s one word for it,” Qin Wanrong huffs.

“We just wanted to congratulate you, Gongyi-shixiong,” Qin Wanyue says. “And wish you good luck with the ceremony tonight - we’re sure it’ll go wonderfully. You won’t forget us now, will you?”

“Ah, it’d be difficult to forget either of you two,” Gongyi Xiao promises them. His expression clouds over for a moment, and he says, “the ceremony…?”

“Head Disciple Gongyi! Hello, greetings!”

Gongyi Xiao turns towards the new arrival, distracted. “Tang-shidi, hello.”

“Ugh,” Qin Wanrong says, rolling her eyes. She mouths *boring* to her sister, before wandering off. Qin Wanyue shoots Gongyi Xiao an apologetic look before trailing after her.

He walks up to Gongyi Xiao, sporting an eager, puppyish energy.

“It’s so good to see you safely back from your mission. I heard it was a great success - as expected of you!” he praises. “You shouldn’t have to go on missions so close to such an important event, though. I know it was an Ice Breathing Frost Drake, but surely someone else could have managed it! Not as well as *you,* of course, but--”

“I’ve always wanted to see an Ice Breathing Frost Drake up close,” Gongyi Xiao marvels. “How could I miss the opportunity? It’s fine though, I made it back in time for… for…”

They’re wandering down one of the winding paths through the gardens, and Gongyi Xiao’s steps unconsciously slow as he searches for and fails to find the words. People brightly smile at and bow to him as they pass, some of the girls even whispering and giggling to each other.

“The ascension ceremony!” he supplies for him. “Ah, it’s really amazing, Head Disciple Gongyi--”

“You know you can just call me Gongyi-shixiong, Tang-shidi.”

“Sorry, sorry. This shidi just wants to show proper respect! But, you know, after tonight that won’t matter any longer. You’ll be *Sect Leader* Gongyi then.”

Gongyi Xiao fully stops in his tracks.

“Sect Leader Gongyi,” he repeats.

“Yes! Or, Zhangmen-shixiong for your own generation, maybe? This is so exciting! You know, it’s been many centuries since the last time a Huan Hua Palace Sect Leader willingly stepped down for their Head Disciple? The position has only been inherited post mortem for a long time now. But then again, how could the Old Palace Master do anything else? What you did was incredible! You saved the whole sect! We all owe so much to you and he knows it, clearly. I’ve never seen him so proud before.”

Gongyi Xiao starts to walk again, his expression going carefully blank in a very familiar way. Is that an instinct, to hide himself whenever he feels out of his depth?

“Oh, I was only doing my duty,” he says lightly. “And surely it’s an exaggeration to say that I saved the *whole* sect.”

“Not at all, not at all! There’s no need to be humble, Head Disciple Gongyi. I shudder to think of what would have happened if you hadn’t taken action. To think that a demon managed to hide himself among our midst all this time…”

Gongyi Xiao’s head whips around. “A demon?”

“Yes,” he says. “That vile Luo Binghe… If you hadn’t stopped him then he really might have taken over the sect. Can you imagine? He tricked us all… except for you. You saw him for who he really was, and you showed the rest of us the truth. You stopped him. We never should have doubted you, and we all owe you a great debt of gratitude.”

“I stopped him,” Gongyi Xiao says. “What did I--?”

“You killed him, of course,” he says. “That’s what righteous cultivators do with demons, isn’t it? Especially one so shameless and greedy as to sneak into a sect to try and steal it for himself. You did what you had to do, Head Disciple Gongyi. We’re all so grateful.”

“No,” Gongyi Xiao says. *“No.* I couldn’t have--”

“Of course you could,” he says. “You did. You’re the Head Disciple of Huan Hua Palace. You’re clever, you’re skilled. Why couldn’t you defeat a demon with some planning and ingenuity?”

“That’s not-- no.” He’s shaking his head. “I can’t have just defeated *Binghe,* I-- there has to be some mistake.”

“There isn’t. This is how things *should* go. The cultivator defeats the demon, protects his sect, wins the day - it’s just like a play, isn’t it?”

“I’m not the hero,” Gongyi Xiao protests. He looks upset, *distraught.* This isn’t how he’s supposed to react.

“What’s the matter? Isn’t this--” he gestures to the world around them, golden and perfect and all for him, “--everything you could wish for? Isn’t this what you *want?”*

What part could Luo Binghe have possibly gotten wrong? His enemy dead and gone, the sect embracing him once again, love and honor rained upon him. This is what Gongyi Xiao’s victory looks like. Perhaps the idea of it is so unfamiliar and hopeless to him that he doesn’t even recognize it when he sees it. Well, that’s why Luo Binghe’s shoving it into his face now. If the dread of being thrown away isn’t enough to motivate him to even *try* to fight back, then perhaps this vision of success *will.*

Not that Luo Binghe wants or needs Gongyi Xiao to fight back, of course. He just wants to understand why he *won’t,* that’s all.

“I don’t want him to be *dead,”* Gongyi Xiao says.

So far, it isn't really working.

"He tried to ruin your life," he says. "It was either you or him - what choice did you have? You can't *both* win."

Gongyi Xiao opens his mouth, looking like he *wants* to be able to argue or disagree. But he closes it again in the end, because he *can't.* It's the simple, ugly truth.

"Why do you have to be the one to lose?" he urges, coaxing. "How is that right or fair? What did you ever do to him? Do you think you *deserve* to be ruined?"

"I-- *no,* but--"

"Then why do you *continue to insist* on doing *nothing* to protect yourself?"

No hatred, no backstabbing, no scheming or revenge. But it isn't even that. It's the lack of… any action at all. He's not even trying to improve or demonstrate why he has the position in the first place. He doesn't cheat or lie or fight to defend himself, but he doesn't even try to take the damned high road to keep his position either. He does *nothing at all.*

It's *maddening* to watch.

"... Tang-shidi?" Gongyi Xiao asks, and Luo Binghe remembers himself.

He hasn't lost control of himself so much since he was raw from the Abyss, the whole of him like a fresh, bleeding wound, sore to the touch. There's just something about Gongyi Xiao that makes him want to *snarl* like a feral beast.

"I apologize, Head Disciple Gongyi! That was terribly rude of me, this shidi profusely apologizes. I just hate to see you doubt yourself. You did what you had to do. Why should you feel any guilt over it?"

Gongyi Xiao looks at him, unreadable. It goes on for long enough for Luo Binghe to think *I've been made, he's seen through me* - but then Gongyi Xiao speaks.

"It's not that I think I deserve to be ruined," he says slowly. His eyes remain on him, but his gaze goes somewhere distant. "But Binghe doesn't deserve it either. For him to just die like that… hated by everyone… It's too sad of an ending. I really can't tolerate it."

Luo Binghe stares at him.

"This must all be some clever trick of his," Gongyi Xiao goes on, in a tone as if he's speaking to himself. "Yes, that makes more sense - faking his own death to take advantage of his enemy's lowered guard afterwards - that's *much* more like Bingge. As if he'd let himself be killed by some nobody like me! He must be lying in wait somewhere, manipulating things in the background, setting up for his grand reveal. It'll likely happen during the ascension ceremony tonight! No, *definitely.* That sort of dramatic timing is the exact--"

As he talks his words get faster, more excited, as if he can't help but be a little thrilled by the idea of Luo Binghe reappearing from the dead to dramatically denounce and defeat him.

“--so *cool,”* Gongyi Xiao gushes. “Always managing to turn circumstances to his advantage is his *real* golden finger. I bet he--”

“What are you *doing?”* Luo Binghe demands. “You actually want me to *win?”*

“Binghe is the sort of person you just can’t help but root for,” Gongyi Xiao says authoritatively, as if this is merely a fact of the universe, as if Luo Binghe has ever had someone root for him his whole *life.* Then he does a double take, and he says, *“Binghe?”*

Luo Binghe realizes that his disguise as Tang Enlai is gone, torn and shredded to the winds, leaving him as no one but himself.

And for just a split second, Gongyi Xiao *brightens* at the sight of him. For a split second, he smiles.

Then he stops, because Luo Binghe is kissing him. He has the collar of Gongyi Xiao’s robes clutched in one hand, the other holding onto the side of his face to keep him in place as Luo Binghe presses their lips together like he wants to make them *bruise,* like it’s an attack. He kisses him like he’s never learned how to be seductive, persuasive, skilled. He kisses him like he’s starving for it.

For just a moment, Luo Binghe closes his eyes and kisses him. Then he breaks and splinters the dream to pieces before he ever opens his eyes again, not letting himself see Gongyi Xiao’s reaction.

It doesn’t matter what it is, so there’s no need for him to see it. No matter what it is, the plan remains unchanged. It must be.

Luo Binghe really is beginning to dislike the taste of this tea. It’s an expensive blend that’s been finely brewed, served in the most fitting of tea sets - but it’s growing to be difficult to appreciate it when he can’t help but now connotate it with meetings with the Old Palace Master.

He still drinks it, of course - and he does so with a smile. He isn’t Sect Leader *yet.*

“... glad to hear that the two of you have been growing closer,” the Old Palace Master says approvingly. “A father worries, you know. She hasn’t been her usual, cheerful self at all lately.”

‘Cheerful’ isn’t exactly how Luo Binghe would describe the Little Palace Mistress. Is the Old Palace Master one of those men who think that wives and daughters should always be happy and content? If so, then it’s no wonder that he showers her with presents and spares her from any discipline. He must be displeased that she’s no longer smiling on command, too upset to be placated by simple bribes.

“I do my best to distract her from anything or *anyone* else that may be upsetting her,” Luo Binghe says. “It’s so inconsiderate not to avoid worrying others, isn’t it?”

A frown creases the Old Palace Master's wrinkled face, the expression sliding into well practiced lines.

"Yes," he says. "Some people are *very* inconsiderate."

A very specific name goes unspoken, and yet rings out loud and clear in the room.

"That reminds me," the Old Palace Master says, "there's a favor I'd like to ask of you, my boy."

"Yes, Shizun," Luo Binghe says, straightening where he sits.

The Old Palace Master chuckles indulgently. "You should hear what the favor is before you go ahead and agree to it like that, you know."

"I'll be able to do whatever you ask of me," Luo Binghe declares, because he knows that the man looks down on overly humble disciples - or rather, hardly even registers their existence. "And I'll of course do it for my shizun."

He hums, his gaze on Luo Binghe pleased and approving. It's as if he's looking upon a beloved son or grandchild, and finding him to be perfectly suitable and satisfactory in all ways.

Luo Binghe knows better, of course. The Old Palace Master's affection for him is empty - or rather, simply possessive. There is no *respect* in it. He likes to act the fond and doting grandfather, but at the end of the day he is the Sect Leader of Huan Hua Palace. This means that he must be remorseless, ruthless, selfish, and deceptive. This means that *he* is in charge, that *he* makes the decisions, that *he* knows best. He is only ever indulgent to the point that he is willing to be so, and never an inch further. Luo Binghe is a fast learner, and only ever needs to be taught a lesson once. He won't forget this.

The Old Palace Master must have written to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect alerting them of Luo Binghe's survival only days after he'd promised not to do so, if even that. He'd lied to Luo Binghe through his teeth, and never once even had the grace to so much as acknowledge it. In his eyes, he likely thinks that there was no wrongdoing at all, no betrayal, no overstepping. If there was deception, then it was only the necessary deception employed when taking care of a child who doesn't know what's best for them.

"Some valued benefactors are coming to visit the sect next week," he says. "Not like the villages that pay tithes as gratitude for our protection, but particular individuals who pay us special favor. They like to be shown that their generosity is appreciated, and to see some of how their money is being used. Greet them, take them on a tour around the palace so they can see some of the newer additions that they've helped pay for, and then dinner. Many of them have family in the sect, so they'd likely enjoy the opportunity to see them as well…"

The Old Palace Master goes on, letting Luo Binghe know what he's in for. Face work, acting as a charming point of contact for donors, many of them the parents of disciples and some of them perhaps just nobles who like to have a powerful cultivation sect show them particular

favor. Every creak in the house that's mistaken for a haunting to be humored by a cultivator swooping along on their sword to dutifully check the place over and 'exorcize' it; that type.

It all sounds terribly like the sort of job to be done by the--

There's a discreet tapping at the door.

"Enter," the Old Palace Master says, and Luo Binghe at once pays keen attention. Normally their meetings are never disturbed; it is as if the Old Palace Master has declared them sacrosanct. He isn't frowning or otherwise acting as if this is a surprise, though, so not an emergency? It--

It's Gongyi Xiao, sliding open the door to bow respectfully to the Sect Leader. He only seems to spot Luo Binghe as he rises, his eyes widening for just a moment before his expression smooths back out into something neutral and controlled. He approaches the table, but doesn't sit. The Old Palace Master doesn't invite him to do so.

"Gongyi," he says, the warm, indulgent grandfatherly smile dropping away to reveal something sterner. "I've just been talking to Binghe, and it's been decided that he'll be taking care of the visiting benefactors next week."

So it really was a duty of the Head Disciple's then. Not any longer. It has been stolen, snatched away, gifted to Luo Binghe instead. A promising sign. Luo Binghe swallows his tea in a way as to minimize how much he tastes it. It's rich and smooth, and utterly foul.

If this development shocks or upsets Gongyi Xiao at all, he doesn't show it. He merely says, "Yes, Shizun. I'm sure that Luo-shidi will do an exemplary job."

He looks to Luo Binghe as he says this last bit, by all appearances perfectly sincere, perfectly encouraging. *Binghe is the sort of person you just can't help but root for.*

Madly, Luo Binghe catches himself searching Gongyi Xiao's face for any trace of their kiss. A bruise from the sheer strength of how he pressed against him, a cut where the sharp point of his canines caught on his lips, a flush to his cheeks and a darkening of his eyes as he looks at Luo Binghe.

But there's nothing. Of course there's nothing; it was only a dream. A forgotten one, at that. It can't matter if it never really happened, if Luo Binghe is the only one who will ever know of it; if it won't change a single damned thing of what's about to happen. It means less than nothing.

"So am I," the Old Palace Master says. "Which is why *he's* the one doing it."

Luo Binghe thinks he might hate this man. It's an odd, sudden realization. Sure, he's never *liked* him, never actually trusted him - but that's because he never trusts anyone. The Old Palace Master at the very least is *useful,* and isn't that the best thing someone can be? As a Sect Leader to be won over and eventually replaced, he's been nothing but a godsend, practically rolling out the carpet for Luo Binghe's ascension.

But there's something *repulsive* about just how quickly and easily he's been turned against Gongyi Xiao, who has been nothing but his loyal and hardworking Head Disciple for years now. *This* is how the Old Palace Master repays him for all of that loyalty? Just turns his back on him the moment someone more pleasing comes along? Every time the Old Palace Master treats Gongyi Xiao coldly, Luo Binghe's hatred for him grows just a little deeper, a little more furious. Every time he treats Luo Binghe *warmly,* it grows as well.

"This disciple respects his shizun's decision," Gongyi Xiao says, responding tactfully to a barely veiled insult.

"Perhaps," the Old Palace Master says pointedly, "I should trust Luo Binghe with *more* of your duties as well, since he does them so well."

He says it like a threat.

Gongyi Xiao doesn't flinch, his expression fixed in place like a mask.

"If Shizun thinks it best," he says smoothly.

The Old Palace Master looks at him for a moment, his gaze hard, and there's a breathless tension to the room - before he turns his body away from him.

"You're dismissed," he says.

Luo Binghe's heart is beating hard in his chest. *Almost,* he thinks. *He almost just did it* now, *right here.*

"Yes, Shizun," Gongyi Xiao says, and turns to leave.

"Gongyi-shixiong," Luo Binghe says, and Gongyi Xiao stops as if his sleeve has been grabbed. Luo Binghe realizes that it's the first time he's spoken since Gongyi Xiao arrived. "Perhaps you could later give me some advice on how to handle the donors? This shidi would be grateful for any guidance you have to share."

Gongyi Xiao looks at him, his face impenetrable, unreadable, his dark eyes searching. It's as if he's trying to find a *motive* for the request, his true reasoning. Why would Luo Binghe ask him for help? Why would he do so in front of the *Old Palace Master?*

Why indeed?

"Of course," Gongyi Xiao says. "I'm sure there's not much I could teach you, but I'd be happy to offer up any assistance I can."

"Thank you," Luo Binghe says. Gongyi Xiao nods to him, and then departs.

"You needn't show him pity, my boy," the Old Palace Master says after a moment. "He knows that Huan Hua Palace is sink or swim. If he has no fight in him, then he only has himself to blame."

Luo Binghe had been idly planning on keeping the Old Palace Master around after taking over, just to give himself an air of legitimacy. He'd be able to do so, with how the man's been eating out of the palm of his hand. Luo Binghe could convince him that surrendering his sect is his *own* idea, that it's all voluntary and willing - an immortal master graciously stepping down in his golden autumn years for the younger generation, making everyone nod their heads approvingly at his wisdom and generosity.

But perhaps that won't be necessary after all.

"I don't pity him," Luo Binghe replies coldly.

"No," the Old Palace Master says approvingly. "You don't, do you? Binghe, my boy, you fit in at Huan Hua Palace like this is where you were always meant to be. Cang Qiong Mountain was only ever a fleeting mistake."

Just like the fine tea, the Old Palace Master has a gift for making a compliment taste sour. But Luo Binghe still swallows it, of course.

"Thank you, Shizun."

Chapter End Notes

This fic now has some lovely fanart by lady-dysnomia!

And even some more fanart by teknote!

Bamboo Stalks

Chapter Summary

Again, Luo Binghe thinks.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 4.1k words long.

“Have you heard?” one disciple whispers to another, and Gongyi Xiao slows where he walks the halls of the palace.

“Heard what? Be more specific.”

“So you *haven’t* heard, then. The Old Palace Master is finally replacing his Head Disciple!”

Gongyi Xiao goes completely still. His face is frozen.

“Truly? Ah, it’s about time. That Gongyi Xiao has been blundering far too much lately. Who’s the replacement? Oh, let me guess--”

“--it’s Luo Binghe!”

“I knew it. A much more fitting choice, honestly. The Old Palace Master would have been a fool not to see it, and a fool he isn’t.”

“It’s satisfying to see, isn’t it? Everyone in their correct places.”

“What’s going to happen to Gongyi Xiao?”

“Who cares? *Something* will be done with him, I suppose. He’ll be given some duty that doesn’t matter, set aside in some unimportant place where he won’t be seen or remembered. That’s the way it always goes in these sorts of situations, isn’t it?”

“I can’t help but pity him just a little.”

“Don’t. He brought it on himself. If he wanted things to end differently, then he would have *fought back.”*

Gongyi Xiao stands there for a moment longer - and then walks on. He doesn't go confront the people whispering about him, doesn't even stop to see their faces. He just goes.

Again, Luo Binghe thinks, and the landscape shifts.

"No one wants you here."

"I know," Gongyi Xiao says.

"You shame Huan Hua Palace just by being our Head Disciple," Tang Enlai throws in. "Why is it *you?* It should be someone else, *anyone* else."

"It should be Binghe," Qin Wanyue says righteously. "He's so strong and noble - it's an *injustice* that he isn't Head Disciple instead."

"I'm sure that Luo-shidi would make a very fine Head Disciple," Gongyi Xiao says.

"You don't get to say that!" Qin Wanrong snaps at him. "You're being so selfish, clinging to your position like you are, keeping him from having it. It's *so* embarrassing to have to watch you be slowly pried away from it. You should just disappear, get it over with."

"I can't believe I once respected you," Shao Wenling says. "How shameful."

"You're just a joke, aren't you?" Han Xiaodan asks. "Luo-shixiong's so much better than you that it's *funny."*

"If the Old Palace Master sees fit to dismiss me, I'll accept his decision," Gongyi Xiao assures them.

"Binghe doesn't need your surrender to win!" Qin Wanrong proclaims hotly. "Don't insult him with that sort of attitude, and just *fight back."*

Gongyi Xiao says nothing.

Again, Luo Binghe thinks.

"I don't think I ever wanted to marry you at all," the Little Palace Mistress says. "I just thought I was in love with you because I'd never really felt it before - because I'd never known *Binghe* before. But now I do, and comparing the two of you… it's like night and day."

"I understand," Gongyi Xiao says.

She shoots him a hard, disappointed look and says, "Binghe is so much more passionate and ambitious than you. He never lets *anyone* insult or wrong him without paying them back tenfold."

“No,” he says. “No, he really doesn’t. He’s a very proud person.”

“Not like you at all,” the Little Palace Mistress says. “What pride can you claim to have, when you let people talk about and treat you however they like with no consequence? Don’t you have a *spine?”*

Luo Binghe thinks about Gongyi Xiao’s cold, harsh demeanor when shutting down those two torturers in the Water Prison. He thinks about how firm and unyielding he’d been when fighting Hallmaster Hou for a private bedroom for young Cai Yun. He’s *seen* Gongyi Xiao stand up for other people - so why won’t he do it for himself?

“I’m very happy,” Gongyi Xiao says, “to see that Fu-shimei has found someone worthy of her heart.”

“You could have been worthy of my heart,” the Little Palace Mistress says, grabbing at the collar of his robes and glaring into his eyes, “if only you’d *fought back!”*

Gongyi Xiao looks away from her piercing eyes without a word.

Luo Binghe *snaps.*

The Little Palace Mistress whisks away like dust in the wind. The landscape around Gongyi Xiao boils up and smears, shifts, stretches. It’s not at all a smooth and deliberate transition, but instead more like a frustrated artist tossing paint onto their creation in a fit of anger. It turns illogical, twisted; a strange and impossible version of Huan Hua Palace. The high and swooping lines of the Gold Dining Hall’s ceiling dominate the sky, even though the Goldfish Pond glimmers in the background, grass underfoot, and the leaves of all the trees hang heavy and gilded with gold. He can turn his head and see the Peach Orchard out of one window, and then turn his head the other way and see the Crystal Garden even though the two are on opposite ends of the palace grounds. He can hear the distant rushing of water, as if the Water Prison is buried so close underground that the separation is only paperthin.

“You,” Luo Binghe snarls, and he’s just *there* now, standing in front of Gongyi Xiao with no disguise in the way, no dream puppets to distract him. “What is the *matter* with you?! Is it apathy, is that it? Do you just not *care* about what I’m taking away from you?”

Luo Binghe knows that’s not it even as he says it. He smiled at Xie Ruonlan so warmly when she finally managed to make a sword glare, and knows the ins and outs of the palace so well, and looks upon the Little Palace Mistress so fondly, and-- he can’t just *not care.* He wouldn’t have put so much effort into being a good Head Disciple for so long if he didn’t.

Gongyi Xiao gives Luo Binghe a dumbfounded, startled look at his sudden and incredibly hostile appearance, acting as if they’re already deep inside of an argument that he’s only just now hearing of.

“What?” he asks.

“Do you think,” Luo Binghe spits out, “that if you return every slight and injustice with nothing but that polished, graceful smile of yours that they’ll eventually be satisfied? Do you

think that if you politely take everything they sling at you that they'll feel too guilty and just *stop?* All you're doing is making it *easy* for others to abuse you!"

My shixiongs are just helping me train. They're just helping me build my constitution. I need to learn how to do all of these chores. It's my own fault for being slower than everyone else. If I just work hard enough, they'll see--

"I'm not being *abused,"* Gongyi Xiao protests. "Just--"

"You're just seeing the sect turn against you, just seeing them disdain and disrespect you, seeing them get ready to discard you for no reason that's your fault. Just *that!"*

"It's fine," Gongyi Xiao says. "It's not that bad. It could be worse."

It sounds exactly like the sort of thing that Luo Binghe might say as a young Qing Jing disciple, so eager to not sound disrespectful or ungrateful. Starving for *crumbs,* and being denied even that.

It makes him so angry that he can hardly breathe past it.

"You're making the *same damn mistake,"* he cries, maddened beyond sense. He wants to tear at his hair, and grabs at Gongyi Xiao's arms instead. "Just *fight back,* damn it! Don't just roll over and take it! There is no point where they will *stop!* If you do not fight me, I will oust you from the sect! You know that! You *know* that!"

Gongyi Xiao looks at him with blank, wide eyes, as if he can't understand why Luo Binghe's so agitated.

"But it's fine," he says. "It was always going to happen anyway."

"Because you insist on letting it!"

What exactly does Luo Binghe have to do to get a single spark of indignation to show itself? How far does he have to go? He just wants Gongyi Xiao to be angry, to *show* that he's angry. He's tried so hard to provoke him, and nothing, absolutely *nothing--*

"Stand up for yourself," Luo Binghe says, and he's not sure if he sounds like he's commanding him or begging. "If you don't, no one else ever will. Don't you *get* that? No one will save you. You have to do it yourself--"

Gongyi Xiao *laughs.* It's so startling that Luo Binghe stops in his tracks. It was an abrupt, sudden laughter, wry and bitter at the edges. Gongyi Xiao is now wearing the smile not of a happy man, but of someone who has helplessly and unexpectedly found something darkly amusing about his own execution. It painfully wrenches at something deep inside of Luo Binghe's chest to see it.

"Do you want to play with your food, trying to make me put up more of a fight before you're done with me?" he asks. "Am I too easy of a challenge for you, Binghe?"

Gongyi Xiao's dreams are delicate, fickle things, Luo Binghe has learned. He sleeps lightly and doesn't dream much unless forced to. It makes him difficult to get anything concrete from, and for Luo Binghe to get him to do much creation of his own. He's almost always just reacting to things that Luo Binghe brings to his dreams himself.

So Luo Binghe had honestly almost forgotten that Gongyi Xiao might very well know that he's a demon - until now. Now, he suddenly remembers it very well. Gongyi Xiao looks at him not like he's a human being, or even a person. He looks at Luo Binghe like he's a force of nature. Like the tide, like the wind, like an *earthquake.* Uncontrollable, wild. Dangerous.

"Even if I kicked and screamed and did everything I possibly could to try and stop this, I'd never be able to defeat you," Gongyi Xiao continues, his tone slipping into something matter of fact. "Not in a hundred, million years. So, it's not even an option, right? What would be the point? If I'm going to lose either way, then I might as well not drag it out and make things even worse for myself. I'm just doing the most intelligent, *rational* thing."

"You could defeat me," Luo Binghe finds himself saying. "I've been defeated before. I've had my face ground into the mud."

And he'd vowed to himself to never, ever let it happen again.

"And you'll make sure to pay all the people who did that back, won't you? I don't want to be one of the people on your *list,* Binghe. That's a pretty fucking terrible place to be!"

"You should fight even if it looks hopeless. The worst thing that could happen is that you lose anyway, and you're so certain that that's already going to happen. Maybe you'll surprise yourself. Maybe you'll win."

Gongyi Xiao gives him a jaded, scrutinizing look of calculation.

"Do you intend to show me mercy?" he asks, as if he already knows the answer to the question. "To *let me* win? No? Of course not! You're far too practical for that. You're the sort who crushes his enemies, and then anyone else who *might* be your enemy too, just to be safe. Pull the weed up by its roots, right? It's too cruel even for you to try and convince someone they might win just so you can stomp on their hope later. Why are you trying so hard to make me fight, when you're planning on defeating me anyway? Or do you really mean to say that you'll have pity on me?"

No. The answer comes to him instantly. No, he won't have pity on Gongyi Xiao. He won't show him mercy, won't let him win. Luo Binghe has come too far for that, has gone through too much and done too much to even consider throwing all of that effort and pain away. It's not even an option. He *has to* win because he *has to* accomplish his plans. He just has to.

And he knows just as well as Gongyi Xiao that he won't be the one to lose. He's too strong, too unscrupulous, too *manipulative* to ever possibly lose here. He's already gained so much headway, has come so far. What could Gongyi Xiao possibly do at this point to stop Luo Binghe? The Old Palace Master almost named Luo Binghe his Head Disciple yesterday on the spot. It's too late. He's pushed everything far enough along that it's gained its own

momentum now. Luo Binghe could simply stand back and do nothing more, and things would still reach their inevitable conclusion after only a matter of time.

He's going to win. He'll become Head Disciple, and then he'll deal with Gongyi Xiao appropriately. He'll be removed, discarded. Thrown away.

There are worse fates than being thrown away. I should be grateful.

"You could tell people about me," Luo Binghe hears himself say.

"Tell people what?" Gongyi Xiao asks, all genuine, confused incomprehension.

It's completely impossible to say whether Gongyi Xiao truly *doesn't* know the one secret that could ruin Luo Binghe at this stage, or if he's just… what? Lying? Or that it just seriously hasn't occurred to him that it's an *option?* Maybe he thinks that no one would believe him, that he couldn't prove it. That it's just a trap that Luo Binghe has already set and prepared for him to walk into.

"You need to do something," Luo Binghe says. "Just-- *something.* Anything. If you don't, then-- I'm not going to go easy on you, Gongyi-shixiong."

"Guess I'll die," Gongyi Xiao says lightly, a wry, humorless twist to his voice like he's making some sort of joke. Luo Binghe wants to *slap* him.

"This isn't a joke! Take this seriously, take your *life* seriously! I'm going to steal everything you have for myself and leave you with nothing. You can't be fine with that, you *cannot.* If you tell me you are then it's a damned lie--!"

As Luo Binghe talks, Gongyi Xiao looks - away. Behind him, and then up above, his eyes tracking something. He says, "is this what Qing Jing Peak looked like?"

Luo Binghe stops. He looks.

All of the gold is gone. The Goldfish Pond, the Peach Orchard, the swooping lines of the grand dining hall - all gone. Instead, bamboo stalks sprout from the ground and stretch far up into the sky. Too, too far. They're towering, looming, overwhelming - like he's looking from a child's warped, dramatized perspective. He can hear a gently trickling, serene river, just out of sight. He can smell mountain air, fresh and clear and just a little cold.

Behind Gongyi Xiao, behind the bamboo stalks, he can see just the edge of a woodshed.

When had he let the dreamscape turn into this? This isn't from Gongyi Xiao. Can't have been. This can only have come from *him,* seeping and crawling out of him like an unwelcome infestation--

"Binghe?" Gongyi Xiao says, and Luo Binghe's eyes snap back onto him. He suddenly looks concerned, wide eyed and tentative. "Are you okay?"

"Am I--" Luo Binghe says, except his voice comes out strange so that he has to stop. This space is too abstract for it to come out as anything as physical as a rasp or a choke - no,

instead it comes out *too young.*

Gongyi Xiao is looking down at him, like he's taller now. Luo Binghe feels too small, too slight. He looks down.

White and pale green robes.

"No!" he shouts, a hot and furious rejection. He grabs at the front of his robes, and he *wills* his hand to grow claws, sharp and vicious. Digging them in deep, past layers of robes to where flesh should be if this were real, he rips and *tears*--

"Binghe, stop it!" Gongyi Xiao is on him, grabbing at his arms, his wrists. "You're hurting yourself!"

"It doesn't *matter!"* he tries to snarl, but there's no demonic rumble to it, only a tight, panicked edge. He sounds more like a boy than a man. This is a dream; the only part of himself that he'll be wounding is his mind, and that's fine, that's *fine,* he heals quickly and no one will see--

"Of course it matters," Gongyi Xiao says, and the sharp edge to his voice is blunting, being deliberately flattened out into something firm and in control. He's finding his composure already, while Luo Binghe's is nowhere in sight.

He has a hold on both of Luo Binghe's wrists, and then he actually *pulls them away* from Luo Binghe's chest, overpowering him as easily as if the apparent age discrepancy between them is real. Luo Binghe is shocked silent by it, giving Gongyi Xiao more time to speak.

"Look at me," Gongyi Xiao says, his voice now steady and soothing, "Can you do that for me, Binghe?"

This is his dream, Luo Binghe realizes. *He's taken control.*

The thought should send him into a cold panic, and yet it doesn't. It just comes to him as a pang of understanding, that now that he's become distracted and shaken enough to let go of the reins, they have naturally slipped back into Gongyi Xiao's hands.

His eyes are dark and deep, like twin lakes he could swim in and never reach the bottoms of.

"There you go," Gongyi Xiao says, calm and matter of factly approving. "Good job. Now take a deep breath - just like this."

He takes a deep breath, his lungs inflating and chest rising purely because that's what he expects to happen in this space. Luo Binghe is so hypnotized by the movement that he finds himself copying it before he even realizes what he's doing. Gongyi Xiao's hands encircling his wrists feel anchoring, not like shackles at all. Grounding.

He tries to tug out of Gongyi Xiao's grip anyway, because he should. Gongyi Xiao doesn't let go, doesn't release him - barely even sways with the movement. He *expects* to be able to keep his hold on Luo Binghe, and so he does.

“Don’t be scared,” Gongyi Xiao orders. “I’m just holding you until I’m sure you won’t hurt yourself - I’ll let go soon.”

It takes him a moment to place the tone. This is the way that Gongyi Xiao speaks to younger disciples - the upset ones, the ones so overwhelmed by their emotions that they hiccup their sobs out, trembling and shivering with the force of them. Kind and soothing, but also matter of factly taking charge. He’s talking to Luo Binghe like he’s Xie Ruonlan, Pan Huan, some devastated, overwrought *child.*

Luo Binghe can’t remember the last time someone talked to him like this. Not even when he really *was* a devastated, overwrought child.

“Can you take another deep breath for me, Binghe? We can do it together.”

Luo Binghe should fight against this. He should wrench his wrists out of Gongyi Xiao’s hold, he should grab for control of the dream again, he should *leave.*

But Gongyi Xiao makes it sound so simple. Just breathe.

Luo Binghe breathes.

“Good,” Gongyi Xiao says firmly, like he’s doing well. “And then we breathe out slowly.”

His shoulders rise and fall in exaggeration, like he’s showing Luo Binghe a new sword move with slow and obvious motions. They’re standing close enough to each other that he can feel Gongyi Xiao’s exhale brush against his face. He imagines Gongyi Xiao doing this with homesick disciples, disciples struggling and falling behind their classes, disciples left scared and weeping from nightmares.

“You’re feeling calmer now, aren’t you?” Gongyi Xiao asks. “Things aren’t so bad.”

You should have been Head Disciple on Qing Jing, Luo Binghe finds himself thinking with such an aching longing that it fills up every hollow part of him. If Gongyi Xiao had been his Head Disciple, then Luo Binghe would have loved his Peak and his Sect with all of his heart just for that. He would have hung on his every word, brought every accomplishment to him for praise, and been gently soothed and fiercely protected by this kind, noble man. He would have adored him.

But Shen Qingqiu would never, ever choose such a person to be his Head Disciple. If he did, then he wouldn’t be Shen Qingqiu in the first place. It would have all been different.

“I hate these colors,” he says.

“Well, that’s an easy fix, isn’t it? There’s no need to get so dramatic about it; we’ll just find some other clothes for you. Here.”

And Gongyi Xiao lets go of him - for a moment, Luo Binghe actually feels *bereft,* deprived - only to take off his own outer robe, black and golden. He puts it over Luo Binghe’s shoulders for him, and the hem puddles at his feet. He’s still smaller, but somehow it isn’t making him

feel weaker any longer. Just small and easily hidden, like Gongyi Xiao could cup him in his hands and shield him like that.

“There,” Gongyi Xiao says, with the satisfaction of having found a solution to a problem. “That works for now.”

Luo Binghe grabs at the edge of the robe and pulls it closed at his front so that it surrounds him, embraces him.

“Gongyi-shixiong,” Luo Binghe says.

“Yes?” Gongyi Xiao says, calm and steady like he’s prepared for anything that Luo Binghe might say. To reassure any fear he has, to fulfill any request, to gently chide or soothe him.

“Gongyi-shixiong,” Luo Binghe helplessly repeats.

“Mm?” Gongyi Xiao reaches out and smooths a hand over his hair, an almost idle gesture.

“Gongyi-shixiong.”

“What is it, you silly boy?” Gongyi Xiao asks. “Ah, you really are unbelievably cute at this age. It’s criminal! How could anyone ever want to hurt you?”

Luo Binghe has to stop this. He has to leave, because the longer this goes the more he feels like - something. Something large and untameable, like a wildfire threatening to go off inside of his chest. His mouth feels hungry and yearning, like he’s a starving man being tempted. He *wants.*

He is a Heavenly Demon, powerful and fated for havoc and bloodshed. He is a halfbreed, an outcast, an unwanted thing. He is going to make every single person who has ever hurt him pay. He is never going to be hurt again. He is meant to bleed and toil and claw his way to the very top of the heap and never, ever be torn down from it. He is meant for power, control, and *revenge.*

Gongyi Xiao, golden and shining and smiling at him with gentle fondness, is not a part of that. He can’t be. He’s too clean, too kind, too *good.* Luo Binghe would only taint him if he tried to drag him into it, like smearing grime onto something sweet and precious.

“It’s too late,” Luo Binghe says. “We should have met years ago. It’s too *late* now--”

“Binghe--?”

Gongyi Xiao, concerned, reaches out to try and - cup his face, tuck his hair behind his ear, something too-kind, too-tender. Luo Binghe steps back, dodges it. He immediately feels like he’s robbed something from himself, smacked food away when he’s ravenous.

“You’re just an obstacle,” Luo Binghe forces out. “A *distraction,* a-- a--”

A temptation. The temptation to just give up, to forget. But he can’t ever do that.

“A stepping stone,” Gongyi Xiao finishes for him. His hand falls back to his side and the warmth drains away from his face, leaving behind only that familiar, guarded expression instead. Shutting him out. The near overwhelming urge to do or say whatever it takes to get rid of that expression washes over him. *Let me back in!* “I understand.”

He can’t help but feel like Gongyi Xiao doesn’t understand at all, that he has no *idea* what he’s doing to Luo Binghe.

“Don’t waste your kindness on me,” Luo Binghe says. “We’re enemies.”

And to prove it, he *wrenches* control of the dream back into his own hands. The second he does, he burns the bamboo stalks to cinders; sunders the woodshed to splinters and wreckage; chokes that fresh mountain air with sweltering ash. It all happens in the blink of an eye, complete and instant destruction. Luo Binghe looks around at the ruin and devastation, and sees his future. *This* is what he’s working towards. Anything else is only a lie.

Anything else isn’t for him.

Gongyi Xiao is left as the only unmarred part of the landscape, like a flower that has miraculously survived a wildfire. He stands out, a spotless golden figure surrounded by ashes and ruin.

He opens his mouth to say something, but Luo Binghe takes one look at his face and knows he doesn’t want to hear it. He crushes the dream to dust in his hands and lets it spill through his fingers, broken and discarded.

He wakes up in the dark of his room and doesn’t sleep for the rest of the night.

A Humble Radish Garden

Chapter Summary

When Luo Binghe was young, he wanted to be a heroic cultivator.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 5.2k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Luo Binghe was young, he wanted to be a heroic cultivator. Brave, wise, and kind, the sort of peerless immortal master that everyone acted like all cultivators were. He wanted this because his mother told him to.

In hindsight, she must have realized that she was dying long before he ever did. Not that he'd been willing to accept it at all until it actually happened - no, he'd refused to give up hope until the very end. He just needed to get her another blanket, another warm bowl of food, to continue to keep her away from work or worry, and she'd get better eventually. She had to, because she always had before. She had to, because he *needed* her to.

She hadn't. And for weeks before it happened, she started telling him stories about cultivators. She told him about the incredible, impossible things they could do, and how enlightened and merciful they were, and what a meaningful purpose they had in life. She told him about Cang Qiong Mountain Sect, which was further away than some other sects, but which would accept anyone who could pass its entrance test. She had told him that if she ever died, she wanted him to go there. He had told her that she wasn't going to die.

Now that he thinks about it, she probably hadn't been thinking much about giving Luo Binghe a meaningful purpose or impossible powers, though. She had just wanted for him to have a place that would feed and clothe him when she wasn't around to do it for him any longer. A bed for him to sleep in, a place for him to live; that was all she wished for him. She probably would've been happy if he'd just been an An Ding Peak outer disciple for the rest of his life, ambitionless and unimportant. Safe and provided for.

But for a long time, that was what Luo Binghe had thought she wanted for him. He had lost her, and the only thing he had left of her were those wishes and expectations and stories. He had wanted to fulfill them so *badly.* He had wanted to become the bravest, most heroic cultivator in the entire world, strong and courageous enough that she could see him even from the heavens and smile down at him. He had wanted to make her proud.

He had wanted, in short, to be exactly like Gongyi Xiao. Luo Binghe hadn't even known of his existence then, but if someone had shown him the man then he would've pointed at him and said *yes, just like that. That's who I want to be.*

It's funny, isn't it?

He tries not to think about it. What she'd think if she could see him now.

Binghe, what an awful, cruel boy you've grown up to be. How could you?

It doesn't matter. His mother is dead and gone, and she isn't looking. She isn't going to be disappointed in him for the lines he's willing to cross, to be frightened by his grand ambitions, or horrified by his demonic nature. She might not even recognize him if she saw him now - but she *won't* ever see him, so it doesn't matter.

He's free to do whatever it takes to win, and he *will.* Nothing has happened to change that, to change *him.* He is still dedicated to his goals, still fixed to his path, still determined. A little sentimentality--

--how could anyone ever want to hurt you?--

--won't be enough to knock him off his course. Nothing will. He won't allow it.

Which is why he's doing this.

"... the coldhouse is kept at freezing temperatures with the same arrays we usually use to keep our food cold," he says, gesturing up at the frosted over glass panes that climb up high above them. His breath fogs in the air as he speaks. "In this case, however, they help keep these plants that can normally only be found in the Northern Desert alive and well."

Most of the plants are white or a pale blue - presumably to help them blend in with their native landscape. Some sort of vine plant crawls delicately up a winding iron trellis that wraps its way all around the upper edge of the coldhouse, its transparent leaves long and narrow and pointing downwards, uncannily mimicking icicles. One of the guests reaches out to stroke the petal of a flower, and he doesn't stop her - it isn't one of the deadly ones. She makes a soft noise of wonder at the feeling of it.

"That isn't frost on its petals," she remarks, seemingly enchanted. "That's just what it looks like!"

"This is all very impressive," another of the guests remarks. "But is there a purpose to it, or is this just a case of having something for the sake of *having it?"*

"Why can't it be both?" Luo Binghe asks playfully, and there's a few laughs. "No - it really is useful, Lord Shi. Look at this flower, for example. This is the Pure Fresh Snow Bloom, which only grows from the first snowflake that lands on the ground, and wilts as soon as the snow begins to melt. They're very rare, and die quickly unless tended to. We've managed to bring some specimens here, however, and we'll be able to keep it safe for whenever we might need

it. Preparing and consuming it in a certain way can help completely cure otherwise deadly conditions, including hypothermia and pneumonia…"

The guests listen, sincerely interested. He'd *thought* this would be a good choice for the tour. As donors, they may very well be entitled to request such miracle cures from the palace in the future, if they ever might find themselves in desperate need of them. Pretty gardens and paintings are all well and good, but this is a useful addition that they'll all be able to imagine benefiting themselves as well.

It helps that he'd thought ahead and prepared some warm cloaks for them to wear as well, so they aren't all shivering from the cold. The summer sun shines through the panes in vain, trying and failing to warm up the little patch of winter nestled in the midst of Huan Hua Palace's winding gardens.

"You *must* share some cuttings of that darling blue blossom with me," one of the guests gushes at him as they leave, the older woman who had kept touching the flowers. "It's the loveliest thing I've ever seen."

"Ah, Lady Yan, I hate to say no to you, but you know it would just die if you attempted to grow it in your own garden. Not even our winters are cold enough to sustain it."

That, and that 'darling blue blossom' is also known as the Deadly Frostbite Ice Cold Death Flower. It was one of the ones he'd had to stop her from touching.

"The world is so unjust," she sighs, looking superbly forlorn about it.

"I'm sure you'll find a way to soldier through the misery," Luo Binghe replies wryly, giving her a smile. It wins him the same reaction he'd get if he smiled at Qin Wanrong or some other young, girlish person, a little titter of a pleased laugh and a playful smack at his arm.

He's been at this for a couple of hours now, and he already has these rich, important people eating out of the palm of his hand. It's time to progress onto the next step.

"Now then," Luo Binghe says, "how about we all break for dinner?"

Everyone is enthusiastically in favor of this, and he herds them all in the direction of a private dining room. In the rush of everyone getting seated and a disciple being informed to bring in the food, he manages to casually maneuver himself into the seat that he wants.

It's a small group of about a dozen visitors, each of them clad in presumably their finest silks and jewelry. Roughly half of them hold themselves with the casual, presumptive arrogance of emperors and empresses being rightfully catered to. The other half, however, have a certain tension to them; these are the ones who have noticed that, amongst cultivators, they suddenly aren't at the top of the hierarchy any longer. They still act like royalty, but there's a discomfort in their eyes like their surroundings grate on them just ever so slightly, the environment not agreeing or playing along with their act. They are not being worshiped; they're being *humored.* There's a difference.

The woman sitting next to him is one of the latter. She looks to be about thirty (and with a mortal, that's actually probably an accurate guess), and her long, brown hair is twisted up in an intricate style, emerald ornaments gleaming from between the locks. She doesn't have a natural beauty, but she's draped in such finery that it's easy not to even notice it. Her eyes are critical and analytical, seeming to take in and judge everything and everyone around her at all times.

"After the dinner, I thought you could all have some time to wander the public areas of the palace freely," he says. "It would be a good chance to visit any friends or family who might be a part of the sect, or to just sightsee at your own pace."

There's an agreeable buzz - and then the food arrives, firmly capturing everyone's attention. Luo Binghe allows everyone to settle and dig into their meals for a few minutes, and then turns politely towards the woman sitting besides him.

"You have a daughter here, don't you, Madame Xie?" he asks. "Do you intend to take the opportunity to visit her?"

Her sharp gaze flits to him, and seems to take in, dissect, and then discard him in only a moment. She seems to look at everyone in that exact way.

"I suppose I should, yes," she answers measuredly. "It is a mother's duty to know how her daughter is doing, isn't it."

The last sentence is spoken like it *should* have the inflection of a question, but very much doesn't.

"That's very dutiful of you," Luo Binghe says. "Xie-shimei is a hardworking disciple, and well liked amongst her peers. Anyone would be proud to have her as a daughter."

"Is that so?" Madame Xie says. "I'm glad to hear this, even if I must be the last to know."

He pauses, as if taken aback by this comment.

"What do you mean, Madame Xie?"

"Tell me, Disciple Luo," she says, turning her sharp attention more firmly upon him, as if to pin him down with her gaze. It must be a very effective tactic against most people, but he's met sharper gazes than this one. "Have there been any issues with letter deliveries within the sect as of late?"

Luo Binghe furrows his brow, like he's taking a moment to think it over.

"I can't say I've heard of anything like that, no," he says. "Everything seems to be operating regularly."

"I see. Then my hardworking, well liked daughter will have some explaining to do to me. Perhaps she'll be able to do this better in person than in writing."

"Oh? Have there been issues with your correspondence, Madame?"

“Not at all,” Madame Xie says. “My *daughter’s* correspondence is another matter, however. I seem to be receiving less and less letters from her as of late - and when they do appear they tell me nothing much at all. I’m rather interested in learning the reason as to *why.”*

“Ah,” Luo Binghe says. “Well… It’s easy for the younger disciples to forget that a world exists outside of the palace. They only see what’s right in front of them.”

“I raised my Ruonlan to understand the concept of object permanence,” Madame Xie replies flatly. “She won’t forget that I exist if she goes too long without seeing my face.”

“Of course, Madame. She’s a very bright young girl. I’m sure she must have a good reason for not writing to you more often.”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far. Just because she has a reason doesn’t necessarily mean that it is a good one. I wouldn’t be surprised if that undesirable boy has something to do with it.”

“Undesirable boy?”

She makes a dismissive gesture. “Some charity case that’s managed to worm his way into her good graces. I’ve given Ruonlan my advice on him, but she’s reluctant to swallow it.”

Gongyi Xiao is an orphan taken in by Huan Hua Palace Sect, yet Luo Binghe somehow doubts that this woman would refer to the Head Disciple as ‘some charity case.’ If nothing else, he’d at the very least be *the* charity case.

“... Are you referring to Pan Huan?” he guesses, plucking the name from his memory. He’s seen the two together on occasions, laughing and chattering with each other. They’re friends.

“Yes, that’s the one. She allows him far too many liberties. It is the fault of the uniforms, I believe. Everyone here dresses the same, so it can be easy to forget that they *aren’t* all the same.”

“How well observed,” Luo Binghe says, like someone who hasn’t eaten scraps he’s found on the ground even once in his life. He frowns with concern. “So your daughter is writing to you less and less, and you suspect it might be because someone is… turning her against you?”

“She isn’t foolish enough to suddenly ignore her own mother for *no reason,”* Madame Xie says firmly. “There must be an explanation. Someone likely encouraged her to do this.”

Technically speaking, she’s completely correct. Someone *did* encourage Xie Ruonlan to do this. He remembers those careful, apologetic, comforting words he’d overheard in the library: *I’m not saying that you can’t love your mother, but… you don’t need to let her break your heart like this over and over again.*

She had taken Gongyi Xiao’s advice, then. Advice he’d given out of the kindness of his heart, with nothing but good intentions for her. And now Luo Binghe is going to use that for his own ends.

(Binghe, what an awful, cruel boy you’ve grown up to--)

“Isn’t Pan Huan a little *young* for that sort of manipulation, though?” he asks. “He’s only ten.”

“It would surprise you, the sort of crude cunning some people can have.”

He pauses, as if hesitating over whether or not to say something. He waits just long enough for her patience to start to thin, and then he leans in just a little closer to her. When he speaks, his voice is quieter.

“Madame Xie,” he says to her confidentially, “what you’re telling me is *most* concerning. Exactly how long ago did your daughter’s strange behavior begin? Because now that you mention it, I do remember overhearing a worrying conversation some time ago…”

The palace has a large enough population to count as a city, but it is also vast, and Luo Binghe has put in the effort to learn it intimately. So long as you know its rhythms, its ebbs and flows, then it’s possible to find yourself a place to be alone. This is what Luo Binghe has done.

The garden he is in is unnamed because it is grown to be useful, not pretty. The paved path that snakes its way across the gardens had grudgingly allowed a small offshoot to lead to it, and that had likely only been to protect the grass from being trampled. Small green radish tops poke up out of the dirt in neat lines, lovingly tended to by someone despite how unsightly the palace clearly thinks they are. The only people who ever visit this place are gardeners, and people who are terribly lost. It’s evening now, the sun setting the sky ablaze with shades of bruise purple and ripe peaches. Not the time for either of those groups to come stumbling upon him.

The problem is that, according to plan, Luo Binghe is rather well known now. People come running up to him with their problems and complaints, or to ask him how his latest night hunt has gone, or to simply lavish him with praise. A good few people know where his room is now as well, even if most are too sensible to come and visit him there uninvited. Now, if he wants to be unbothered, he needs to be hidden.

He doesn’t want to be bothered right now. It’s been a long day, in which he’s had to politely smile at and flatter some truly unpleasant people. He wants to just let his face look as cold and tired as he feels. He wants to just *breathe,* feeling like one big, raw nerve. He wants to be left alone.

No. Scratch that. What he *really* wants is for the Little Palace Mistress to come charging at him out of the bushes with her whip. Only two days ago she had dragged him aside for an impromptu fight, offering up zero explanation for her actions before striking, drawing on him the moment they weren’t standing in a crowded courtyard in broad daylight any longer - which by her standards must have been the very height of subtlety and tact.

For a wild, frenzied moment he had thought that he was being ambushed. That she *knew,* had somehow discovered everything, and was out to take him down in an act of bloody, brutal vengeance. Then she had criticized his dodge and gone for a punch to the gut instead of the

throat, and he had realized that she was only taking him up on his earlier offer. To fight *him* instead of the people that infuriated her. Venting her feelings on a safe target, so to speak.

She managed to slam him face down into the ground, and he must have cracked at least two of her ribs in retaliation. It was *far* too cathartic, and now he can't help but just sit here and wait, hoping that she might turn up out of nowhere and give him a good excuse to draw Xin Mo. His hand itches for the hilt, Xin Mo's presence like a whisper and a crooning in his mind that's *just* on the edge of his hearing, urging him to try and listen closer so he can make out the words.

Greedy thing. He's going to have to go out on another night hunt soon to wet the edge of his blade with the life-blood of some hapless creature again, sating its hunger. It's only going to get louder and louder until he gets it over with. It was easier to handle when he had Mobei and Sha Hualing around; dual cultivating with one of them was always enough to shut it up for a good few days, sometimes even weeks.

He supposes that there are other options. It wouldn't even require effort to convince Qin Wanyue to let him show her his improvements in skill since the last time they tangled. All he'd had to do is offer.

He doesn't want to offer. The idea just doesn't hold any appeal whatsoever. At least Sha Hualing and Mobei wouldn't read anything into it, wouldn't come up with some sort of grand romantic narrative out of something that is nothing more than a practical necessity. It would just be like a spar to them, quick and dirty and violent. Not an indicator of anything more meaningful.

Luo Binghe thinks of Gongyi Xiao.

Maybe he should draw Xin Mo after all. Just a little, just while he's alone. Let the blade breathe, allowing it to drink in the dying rays of the setting sun and hum with hungry, greedy impatience, yearning to cut down an enemy that isn't even there. This is the equivalent of letting a starving tiger lick blood from his fingers in an attempt to placate it, the very definition of playing with fire. It isn't a good idea, but right at this moment he doesn't particularly care. He wants-- he just *wants*--

He notices the approaching presence before it arrives because for five long years his survival depended on him never ever letting himself be taken off guard. His Eternal Abyss trained and tested senses pick up on swift but silent footsteps, and he's up and on his feet before the new arrival's shadow even has the time to spill across the grass. Who would come here, at this hour? His hand is on Xin Mo's hilt, the sword's dark, eager anticipation roiling inside of his skull--

Gongyi Xiao walks into the humble little radish garden. His gaze searches for something for a fraction of a second, sweeping across the garden, before snapping and fixing onto Luo Binghe with such intensity that he's immediately struck with the conviction that *he* is what Gongyi Xiao was searching for. He knew that Luo Binghe would be here. How? He hadn't told anyone where he was going, had taken pains to avoid notice--

“Luo-shidi,” Gongyi Xiao says, and it isn’t at all in the way that he tends to say his name. There’s something hard and fierce about it now, and his eyes are unerringly trained on Luo Binghe as he closes the distance between them.

For the first time, Luo Binghe wonders: Has Gongyi Xiao been paying just as much attention to Luo Binghe as he has to the Head Disciple this entire time? Is *that* how he somehow knew exactly where he’d gone off to sulk?

“Gongyi-shixiong,” he responds automatically. He blinks, adjusts, shaking off the surprise of Gongyi Xiao’s unexpected arrival. Normally it is Luo Binghe seeking him out, whether he pretends it’s just a coincidence that he’s run into the man on the ludicrously vast and well populated grounds of the palace or not. It’s oddly stunning to have the regular state of affairs reversed on him. “Is there something the matter? Is it an emergency--”

Gongyi Xiao comes to a stop three steps closer than Luo Binghe had thought he’d come - than he’s ever come. This close, he could count his eyelashes if he wanted to. It’s very difficult to pay attention to his eyelashes, however, when they’re so close to the piercing, intense darkness of his eyes, now flashing with an agitated energy that leaves him feeling hypnotized, rooted in place.

“Why yes,” Gongyi Xiao says, his voice still just a little too tight, too tense, “there *is* something the matter. I’ve been reprimanded for unduly influencing a young disciple, inappropriately interfering with family business, and maliciously withholding correspondence from a fellow sect member. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you, Luo-shidi?”

Oh. Those flashing eyes, the hard edge to his voice - that’s *anger.* That’s anger at *Luo Binghe.*

Finally! he wants to cry, a frustration that’s been building and simmering within him for *months* now at last finding some relief. *It took you fucking long enough!*

“And you wouldn’t happen to know why my rooms were searched, would you?” Gongyi Xiao continues, not allowing Luo Binghe the space to even answer his first question, too furious to slow down enough to wait. “You wouldn’t know why a letter that Xie-shimei gave to me for safekeeping in *confidence* has been *confiscated,* do you?”

Gongyi Xiao’s anger is a cold and sharp one, as severe as the deadly end of an icicle. Luo Binghe can’t help but admire it. He had been beginning to wonder if there was nothing in the world that he could do to bring this indignation out of Gongyi Xiao; he’s so relieved to be proven wrong. *This* is what finally did it, and he has no idea why.

“Would I?” he manages to ask. “You seem very sure of the answer already, Shixiong.”

Gongyi Xiao takes a deep breath, nostrils flaring, chest rising - and then he actually *shouts at him.*

“You have *no excuse* for dragging some innocent little kid into this! It’s completely unnecessary! It’s *overkill!* And I know that’s your modus operandi, but this is so-- so

unwarranted! You don't need to do this! What did *she* ever do to you?! Do you have any idea-- if I hadn't managed to convince them that I pressured her into giving me the letter then her mother would have given her *hell* for it. She might have even tried to *withdraw her from the sect!"*

It's the most passionate he's heard Gongyi Xiao be outside of dreams that wasn't down in the Water Prison, boiling over with outrage and compassion for the prisoners around him. Luo Binghe looks into those flashing, furious eyes and realizes: Gongyi Xiao isn't angry for himself. That's not why he's here, shouting at Luo Binghe. He's furious because he'd used *Xie Ruonlan* as a means to an end, collateral damage in an attack against him. This isn't about Luo Binghe hurting Gongyi Xiao at all.

It's like being doused with a cold bucket of water, the giddy excitement he'd been feeling dying away all at once. It leaves behind a frustrated disappointment only more bitter and pointed for the brief reprieve, the false belief that it was gone and over with.

Luo Binghe laughs. It just falls out of him, involuntary and unexpected, the emotion roiling in his chest crawling up his throat and out of his mouth. It's hard and mean, and it startles Gongyi Xiao enough to make him stop up short.

"Is that all?" he asks.

"Is that *all--?"* Gongyi Xiao starts, offended.

"Is that really *all* that Gongyi-shixiong is angry with this shidi for? Is there *nothing else* that he harbors a grudge over? No way in which he has been wronged?"

There's a beat as Gongyi Xiao looks at him, and Luo Binghe *sees it.* He sees the moment that Gongyi Xiao's sharp anger calms enough for his self restraint to snap its jaws closed around him again. He sees him lean back so that he's no longer in Luo Binghe's space, sees him loosen his fists and relax his shoulders, sees the fine, handsome features of his face smooth back out like the surface of a tranquil, opaque lake. He sees him take all of his anger and shove it down, back, away.

He sees him *back off.*

"No," Gongyi Xiao says blankly, politely. "There isn't anything else. This shixiong apologizes for how he spoke to his shidi. It's been an upsetting day, and I lost control of my temper. I shouldn't fling blind accusations around just because I'm--"

Cut him, Xin Mo whispers. He ignores it.

"--struggling," he finishes. "Please do me the favor of forgetting this. I don't know what came over me."

Luo Binghe breathes. After a moment of this doing nothing for him, he speaks.

"You're *apologizing,"* he says, "to *me."*

"... Yes. Luo-shidi, you mustn't take me too--"

Luo Binghe *snaps.*

Snapping, in this case, entails lunging towards Gongyi Xiao like a pouncing animal. He grabs him by the collar of his robes - Gongyi Xiao's eyes grow round and wide, his entire body recoiling - Luo Binghe hooks a foot around the back of his ankle - and then the entire world is tilting, spinning around them as they both fall to the ground in a messy heap. Gongyi Xiao's hand darts downwards - for the hilt of his sword? - but Luo Binghe manages to intercept it. He grabs his wrist and then the other, before *slamming* them both down onto the ground above Gongyi Xiao's head.

"Luo-shidi--!" Gongyi Xiao says, wide eyed and alarmed.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Gongyi-shixiong," Luo Binghe says silkily, fucking *sweetly* in contrast to the brutal hold he has on Gongyi Xiao's wrists. Anger beats a tattoo inside of his skull and his veins, in harmony with his heart. "You're right. I *did* tell Xie Ruonlan's mother that you were turning her daughter against her. I did tell her that you were keeping her correspondence away from her. I *lied* to her, Shixiong."

Gongyi Xiao stares up at him, all stunned incomprehension. Somehow, this just spurs Luo Binghe further on.

"I've told many lies about you. About where you've been, what you've said, what you've done. I've done my best to make you look a *fool.* I've framed you for countless small incompetencies, I've stolen and poached your admirers from you, turned every single person I could against you. I've even tried to take the Little Palace Mistress from you - and I won't stop. I won't stop any of it until you're *ruined."*

As he speaks, he searches Gongyi Xiao's face for even a flicker of anger, the slightest trace of horror, a drop of shock. He finds none of it. There is only confusion and fear and urgency, like he's found himself in danger at a moment he hadn't been expecting it.

The complete and utter absence of rage *maddens* him.

"And I'm the one who called those demonic beasts on our mission," he tells him in a low voice, feeling wild and furious enough for it to blot out all sense, like the clouds covering up the sun during a storm. "I circumvented your alarm array. I did it to make you look careless and incompetent. I did it to *sabotage you."*

"Why--" Gongyi Xiao says, and Luo Binghe's mind races ahead to finish his words for him. *Why would you do that to me?* "Why are you telling me this?"

As if Luo Binghe *has* a reason; as if any of his behavior here makes any sense at all. He feels wild and uncontrolled, like not even he himself could hope to stop whatever he's about to do next.

"I've been behind every misfortune you've suffered since I arrived here, Gongyi-shixiong," Luo Binghe breathes, looming over Gongyi Xiao closely enough for a loose curl to brush against his cheekbone. "And I'll only continue to be so. *What do you intend to do about it?"*

There. Luo Binghe's done it. He's confessed to everything, made it painfully clear and undeniable to both of them what he's doing in a way that he can't take back. He's challenged Gongyi Xiao, threatened him, *dared* him to do something about it. Neither of them can pretend like nothing is happening now. That idea is such a visceral relief that he feels heady from it, impulsive and giddy. It's all out in the *open* from now on, between the two of them.

He searches Gongyi Xiao's features for a single spark of that earlier anger, and he finds--

"Nothing," Gongyi Xiao says.

Luo Binghe goes still.

Gongyi Xiao twists his wrists - not with any particular force or a tricky maneuver, just a simple movement of tendons and muscles - and Luo Binghe's shocked loose grip releases him. He sits up slowly and carefully, pushing himself away from where Luo Binghe had been caging him in. He looks at Luo Binghe and his face is cool and distant and untouchable. Unreachable.

"Luo-shidi can do whatever he likes," he says mildly. "He can rest assured that this shixiong intends to do nothing to interfere with him or whatever his plans may be. I'm no threat at all."

With that, Gongyi Xiao calmly stands up, taking a moment to unhurriedly brush off his robes. If Luo Binghe had been trying to provoke him - and he *had,* he *had been* - then he's utterly and completely failed. Gongyi Xiao looks unruffled and unmoved. He looks like he doesn't care in the slightest.

"I'm sorry for bothering you," he says. "It won't happen again."

And then he leaves Luo Binghe there, kneeling on the grass empty handed and frozen still and silent, with nothing but the unmistakable sensation that he's the loser of whatever just took place.

Chapter End Notes

There is some more new lovely fanart for this fic now by Sintia!

A Lonely Outpost

Chapter Summary

> He fully enters the dream. At once, he's taken aback, because he's confronted with something unprecedented: Gongyi Xiao is already dreaming, with no urging from Luo Binghe.

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is 5.3k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is blood and ash and *filth* coating every inch of him, ground into his hair and his skin and his clothes, making it so that every time he touches something he leaves a disgusting stain behind him. It's the sort of grime that he would be careful not to touch, but he's so covered with it that it's impossible to avoid. He has nothing clean on him to rub it away with, and it lies on him so thick and pervasive that he'd only be spreading it further if he tried. He can *constantly* feel it on him, a foul layer of sweat and guts and dirt that he can taste in the back of his throat every time he inhales.

The worst part is how he can't spare a single moment to do anything about it. He's never been dirtier in his life, and it's at the very bottom of his priority list. Before he can even think to waste time, attention, or energy on cleaning himself he first has to consider food, water, rest, safety, injuries, being quiet, evading notice, escaping pursuers, staying safe and alert for incoming threats, avoiding--

It's just a dream, he thinks, and then that's all it is.

He stops running, and closes his eyes. One by one he strips away every sense memory that has sunk into and scaffolded this dream, and when he opens them up again he's where he wants to be, where he's *meant* to be: The opening courtyard of Huan Hua Palace.

It would be better if he could skip the first step entirely, if he could fall asleep and simply find himself on the bright and well tended grounds of Huan Hua Palace from the very first moment. It would be more efficient. But changing your dreamscape doesn't happen overnight. If he just keeps doing this over and over again, keeps deliberately changing and altering his dream into *this* every single night then it's going to have to sink in and stick eventually. It has to.

His dreams won't be trapped down in the Eternal Abyss forever. *He'd* been trapped there and had managed to escape, after all. He doesn't see why it should get to keep a single part of him.

"Boy," Meng Mo says, appearing the way people tend to in dreams; with no transition point or moment of arrival, as if he'd been there all along. The trailing ends of his robes and decorative shawls and hair all gently float in the air as if he's underwater, and the gems embroidered into the borders and hem of his outfit glow from within like embers. He looks at Luo Binghe, and then behind him. He cocks his head to the side. "Does he really plague your thoughts that often?"

Luo Binghe turns, and he sees him.

Every other time he's constructed this imitation of the palace he's left it empty, like a stage set without any actors. But now, sitting on one of the marble benches is Gongyi Xiao. Just a little off in the distance, like an expected part of the backdrop. He's reading a book, a small pile of scrolls and an uneaten peach to the side of him, the sun catching in his dark hair. He looks peaceful and content.

Luo Binghe had not deliberately put him there. He had just thought of Huan Hua Palace and all the essential strokes needed to fill it out, the crucial foundation followed by the fine little details that would truly sell it. The grand, imposing lines of the palace itself, overwhelmingly vast and ostentatious; the rich, living scent, as if the sect had made sure to buy the most expensive air available as well; the blue of the sky, the green of the grass and the leaves, the gold of everything else.

And, apparently, Gongyi Xiao. Reading and at peace, sitting there as if he is an utterly essential component to the setting. How could it be Huan Hua Palace without him?

He's so utterly distracted by this unasked for presence that he doesn't realize that Meng Mo has reached forward to card through his memories before it's already happening. He whips around and *shoves* the invasive, prying touch out of his mind with enough violence to make Mengo Mo hiss, recoiling. But it's too late; he's already seen. He can tell from the careful expression that slides into place on Meng Mo's face, and the surprised, assessing way he looks at Luo Binghe.

Luo Binghe has no reason to feel so *caught out,* so defensive and humiliated. He's just bristling at the blatant disrespect of it, that's all.

"How impertinent," he says coldly, eyes narrowing. "Hasn't anyone ever taught you that you shouldn't go where you aren't welcome?"

"Is that any way to talk to your shizun, boy?" Meng Mo asks. "Your *elder?"*

As if Luo Binghe calls him that for any other reason than to simply humor a self aggrandizing, egotistical self styled prince of dreams. He outstripped Meng Mo's skills a long time ago, and they both know it.

“What do you want?” he asks instead, unamused and impatient. Turning focus away from what just happened. “Are there any issues in the Demon Realm?”

“Nothing urgent,” Meng Mo deflects, casually dismissive. Refusing to catch the hint, like the stubborn, nosy old man that he is. Instead he looks pointedly over to the dream puppet of Gongyi Xiao. “Why is he still here? Shouldn’t he be gone by now?”

From the palace, he means. Not the dream. Or perhaps he means both.

“All in due time,” Luo Binghe says. “I’m not done with him yet.”

“Not done with him? What does that mean? What could he possibly have to offer you, besides what you can take from him?”

“Since when do you ask so many questions?” Luo Binghe demands. “How many times do I have to show that I know what I’m doing? I still haven’t confirmed whether or not he knows about my demonic--”

“Pfah!” Meng Mo waves one ridiculously long sleeve through the air, flamboyantly cutting him off. “So what?”

“So *what?”* Luo Binghe asks, feeling a stirring of incredulous anger within his chest. “So, if he knows then he has *extremely sensitive and dangerous* information about *me* that he could share with *anyone.* I have to know whether or not that’s a risk.”

“Do you?” Meng Mo asks. “Do you *really* need to know, though? What would it change? The way I see it, the game plan remains the same either way. You discredit him and his reputation, get rid of him, and then steal his position. Problem solved. Why aren’t you doing that?”

“I’m *working on it,”* Luo Binghe says, radiating *you’re pushing your luck* with every fiber of his being. “These things take time.”

“Not this much time. You’re close; all you need to do is push it that last inch further, and it’ll all come crashing down on him. Instead, you seem to be doing the *opposite.* Why is that? Are you flinching?”

“I don’t *flinch.”*

“Then what is this? You could be fighting so much dirtier and meaner than this. You’ve made people think that he’s incompetent but well intentioned at *worst.* That’s nothing. Why don’t you do more? Implicate him in something truly despicable, something incriminating and malicious. Say that he sneaks into the Water Prison to torture the prisoners because it gets his jollies off! Say that he has dark motives for paying the younger disciples so much care and attention--”

Luo Binghe grimaces. “Don’t be disgusting.”

Meng Mo points at him. *“Exactly.* That’s the sort of reaction you want to inspire. You want to frame him for the sort of repulsive, horrifying crimes that would make people drop him like a hot coal, no questions asked.”

“My victory is already assured. I don’t need to go to these lengths.”

“But you *could.* Why aren’t you?”

“Mind your own business,” Luo Binghe responds coolly, but Meng Mo only looks at him shrewdly.

“You don’t have an answer for me, do you? You just don’t want to. You’ve grown *fond--”*

“You’re out of line.”

Meng Mo is a visitor in *his* dream. In the blink of an eye day has turned to night, the sky close and heavy and oppressive, the palace grounds going dark like a cellar door has slammed shut on them. Meng Mo twitches slightly at the reminder, the implied threat.

But of course, he just can’t help but push a little further.

“Whatever suspicions he may or may not have about you being a demon don’t matter,” he declares. “If he has them, then he clearly isn’t acting on them anyway! Just crush him into dust and take his position. If you were purely focused on your goals, that would be what you’d do. But instead you’re… distracted.”

“But *why* isn’t he acting on them?” he demands, refusing to acknowledge Meng Mo’s implications. “It makes no sense. His behavior is bizarre! If he’d only accuse me then he might--”

“If your enemy is making a mistake, let him! You should know this! You *do* know this! Where is the vicious, brilliant Heavenly Demon I know, hellbent on achieving his goals, willing to do whatever it takes to get there? If all you want is some pretty little thing who smiles at you then there are *plenty* of other options--”

“Be silent!” he snarls, and there’s black jagged rocks slicing their way out of the lush, green trees and bushes, a large, predatory shadow slithering through the halls of the palace, glimpsed through open doors and windows. The air smells foul, and he holds his breath. Tries to claw his composure back where it belongs, smooth out the unsightly wrinkles warping his dream.

Meng Mo stays still and silent throughout the process, not taking the opportunity to press his argument. It’s the only reason why Luo Binghe doesn’t banish him from his dreams at once.

Finally, everything is back in its proper place, nothing where it shouldn’t be. Luo Binghe speaks, and his voice is deliberate and measured.

“Don’t speak of things you don’t understand,” he says, clipped and forbidding. “That’s not how things are at all. I have the situation perfectly under control, and I’ll bring things to a conclusion when *I’m* ready for it. Not before. Do *not* presume to rush me.”

“But you *will* bring things to a conclusion,” Meng Mo asks after waiting a wary moment. “Won’t you?”

“Of course I will,” he says, turning away, cold and dismissive. Signaling *this conversation is over* with everything he is. “It’s the only option.”

“... Alright, then. Pardon your senior for his worrying. I can see you’re busy; I’ll make my report some other night.”

“See that you do,” Luo Binghe replies, but he’s already gone, dissipated like mist in the wind. Leaving him alone with his carefully constructed clean and golden dream, with only a dream puppet for company. He walks up to it slowly, and looks it over closely.

The construct is finely made, every detail pitch perfect, drawn from Luo Binghe’s many memories of paying close and careful attention to the Head Disciple. The sweep of its eyelashes, the curve of its mouth, the lines of its jaw, the exact shade of its hair… It’s a flawless copy. He would almost worry that he’s summoned the real Gongyi Xiao to inhabit his dream, but his qi curls and seeps into the construct and finds nothing foreign there. It’s just as much a part of Luo Binghe as his own hand or a lock of his hair or a stray thought fleeting through his mind. There’s nothing and no one here but himself.

“Gongyi-shixiong,” he says. Talking to himself, creating meaningless noise.

It doesn’t look up from its book, even though when Luo Binghe glances at the pages he sees that the words are just swirling lines of nonsense. With a flicker of will, he makes the dream puppet’s head rise, its face subtly shifting as if it’s only just noticed him.

“Luo-shidi,” it says. “Is there anything this shixiong can assist you with?”

Luo Binghe just looks at him for a moment, and it doesn’t matter. This isn’t a real conversation with a real person. He doesn’t need to keep it smooth and natural.

“I’m your enemy,” he says at last. “I’m here to ruin you, to steal everything you have. I’m a deceitful half demon, planning on manipulating my way to the top of the sect so I can use it like a weapon to achieve my own ends. I’ll take your home from you and then turn it into something unrecognizable simply because it’s convenient for me.”

He makes Gongyi Xiao’s eyes widen with shock, horror - and then narrow with a venomous hatred.

“You *can’t,”* it says. “I won’t let you. I’ll stop you no matter what.”

“It’s awful of me,” Luo Binghe says. “Despicable, isn’t it?”

“It is,” it agrees, “It’s *unacceptable.* I’ll never allow you to win.”

Luo Binghe searches himself for the slightest trace of satisfaction, but there is none to be found. This isn’t real, after all. He might as well be arguing with his own shadow for all the good it's doing. Killing it would be like slashing at air, and kissing it would be like pressing his lips to his own hand. Completely meaningless.

“Go back to your book,” he says anyways, and he takes the time to put the dream puppet back in its former pose. Head bent, a faint smile and an interested light in its eyes, like it’s

engaged in the text.

And then he leaves, stepping out of his own dream and out into the wide, unprotected expanse of the Dream Realm. It feels like stepping outside of his own skin, a familiar container so constant that he's taken it for granted his whole life, an encasement that has kept his self and his identity in a stable and recognizable shape all this time, separate and distinct from the outside world. The first time he'd done this, the abrupt shock of that exposed, unsafe feeling had woken him up at once. He's used to it now.

It's second nature to seek out and slip into Gongyi Xiao's dreams by now. He's done it so many times, he thinks he could find his sleeping mind with the equivalent of his eyes closed, groping along in the dark for that familiar shape of unconscious thoughts and feelings. It's reflex to reach out and stabilize the shaky foundations before properly stepping in, like thickening thin ice before placing any weight on it. He sinks the fragile shell of it just a little more deeply and firmly into the Dream Realm, so that it's no longer in danger of popping like a soap bubble at the slightest pressure.

Gongyi Xiao sleeps so lightly and so fretfully, Luo Binghe has to be careful and gentle before he can begin to apply his changes. It feels a little bit like coaxing a wary, skittish animal into calmness so that he can be allowed to touch it at all. He's lucky that Gongyi Xiao's already asleep; he's had to wait for hours before.

How often has he visited his dreams now? He hasn't kept count. It feels like it must have been many times, though. There were times he visited without interfering at all, just silently watching and observing, waiting for *anything* to happen without his meddling. He would always be left disappointed and frustrated those times; Gongyi Xiao often dreams of nothing. Then there were other times when he'd become impatient and uncharacteristically clumsy, moving too fast or too hard and bringing the whole thing crashing down around him, waking Gongyi Xiao up before he learned anything much at all.

Does he really plague your thoughts that often?

Those were all necessary visits. Gongyi Xiao is an essential part of his plan, and yet Luo Binghe hardly understands him at all. He knows that he's intelligent and perceptive; that he's kind and nurturing; that the smallest to the most horrific demonic creatures fascinate him equally; that he works well and dutifully for his sect, and easily dismisses it all as him only doing the 'bare minimum' to be expected of him; that he's tactful and diplomatic; that he can hide the slightest flicker of outrage or panic deep within him like a well if required; that he's modest and thin faced when confronted with physical affection; that he warmly adores his closest friend; that when he scolds people, he does it so gently that it feels like being coddled instead; that he - inexplicably, mysteriously, *maddeningly* - seems to genuinely, sincerely, actually *like* Luo Binghe.

He hadn't even had to trick him into it. He just does.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Luo Binghe doesn't understand the *why* of Gongyi Xiao. Why he likes the things he does, why he does the things he does, why he *doesn't* do certain things despite *all reasonable provocation*-- it's infuriating. It turns him into an unsolved mystery, something that itches and prickles at him constantly, urging him to

unwind the knot until it makes *sense.* Gongyi Xiao makes no sense at all, and it drives Luo Binghe to distraction. That's all.

He fully enters the dream. At once, he's taken aback, because he's confronted with something unprecedented: Gongyi Xiao is already dreaming, with no urging from Luo Binghe. Even more shocking than that, the palace is *nowhere in sight.*

Until now, every dream he's spent in Gongyi Xiao's mind has been set there, its golden arches and columns always only a stone's throw away, its lush and well tended gardens ever present. Dreams are like an uninspired, talentless artist lacking in any originality or creativity of their own; they steal and borrow shamelessly from waking life to build their nonsense stories of hope and dread. Gongyi Xiao spends every day in the palace, and so it is as omnipresent as the sky and the sun. Always there in the background, expected and taken for granted. Familiar and comfortable, something to trust in and rely upon.

It's gone now. In its place, there is nothing.

Or, no. It's more like a barren wasteland. Untended to land stretches as far as the eye can see, scant vegetation lying dry and uncared for, an absent wind refusing to stir so much as a handful of dust to convince the eye that it's looking at anything but a still and lifeless painting. Above him the sky hangs, colored a dead blue. Just on the very edge of the horizon, Luo Binghe thinks he sees a heat shimmer, except it doesn't feel warm enough for that. He realizes that he's looking at the Border between the Human and Demon Realms, where reality warps and twists just ever so slightly enough to allow passage between the two.

He looks behind him, and he sees more rolling, stretching emptiness. There is no gold to be seen, or any other color at that. He also sees a small wooden tower, an outpost facing the Borderlands. It looks small and lonesome, surrounded by all that nothingness. There, he sees Gongyi Xiao.

He's sitting at the open edge of the outpost, his legs hanging over the ground far below him in a way that would seem perilous if he weren't a cultivator with a sword to catch him. There's a simple railing in place, but he only uses it to rest his left temple against it as he stares dully towards the Border.

Luo Binghe watches him for a long moment, but he does nothing. He doesn't move nor speak, or so much as blink. Nothing of consequence happens. This is just about as eventful as Gongyi Xiao's dreams ever get without Luo Binghe's interference. Meng Mo taught him that some people dream rich and vast stories every night, and that others dream of nothing but darkness, and that there's no saying which type any one person might be. In his experience, he had informed Luo Binghe, it has almost no bearing on what sort of person they are in waking life.

He still wishes dearly that Gongyi Xiao would have been the former type instead. Maybe then Luo Binghe would understand him better than he does. Or is that mere wishful thinking on his part?

There's a ladder leading up to the outpost. Luo Binghe could simply appear up where Gongyi Xiao already is, but he instead climbs it slowly and steadily. The weathered wood creaks

underneath his weight, announcing him as clearly as a bell, and yet when he arrives he finds that Gongyi Xiao hasn't even bothered to turn around to see him. He keeps his watch upon the Border.

"Gongyi-shixiong," he says, and his voice sounds out of place in this dead and barren place - as if any hint of life is forbidden here. "What are you doing?"

There's the slightest movement of his head, as if he'd thought for just a moment to turn to look at him, but then decided not to follow through on the impulse.

"I'm keeping watch," he says. "What else?"

Gongyi Xiao is so often playing a role. Around him, and around others - around everyone, to an extent. But especially with Luo Binghe. He's been here for months, and yet he thinks he could count all their genuine interactions just on his fingers. Even then, when one of them is honest, the other one *isn't.* One of them holds back when the other reaches out, keeping things restrained and fake, so much held back. He's been talking to Gongyi Xiao in his dreams more and more, for just this reason. At least when they're disconnected from the real world, they can be able to speak *honestly.*

Or at least they should be.

"What else?" Luo Binghe asks, approaching. He's decided that he refuses to have this conversation with Gongyi Xiao's *back,* and so he instead presumptuously seats himself next to the man without permission or hesitation, hooking his knees over the edge, the ground yawning beneath him. "What else *is* there? This place is barren."

"Well, it is the Border," Gongyi Xiao says lightly. He still isn't looking at Luo Binghe; it sparks off an inexplicable spark of anger in his chest. "It's a dangerous place to live, and so all living creatures avoid it if they can. Huan Hua Palace has a duty as one of the land's foremost cultivation sects to guard it, however. People need to be warned if anything or anyone hostile crosses into the Human Realm. It's an important task."

"I know that," Luo Binghe snaps, because he isn't a fool. He's been focusing on learning the ins and outs of the palace itself, but he knows perfectly well that there are outposts and satellite camps that overlook points of vulnerability that need security or maintenance. The parts of the Border that Huan Hua Palace Sect have agreed to guard, places where demons or monsters or curses too powerful to be safely killed or dispelled are trapped and sealed indefinitely. "It's also a task that no lone cultivator is tasked with. You should have a partner here."

"Well," Gongyi Xiao says, "I don't."

And he doesn't say anymore. No explanation, no justification. He just doesn't.

For the first time, Luo Binghe notices another incongruous detail, something *wrong:* Gongyi Xiao's gold medallion is gone. He still wears the golden robes of Huan Hua Palace, although there's more black than gold to them now, but the medallion is missing. Luo Binghe is so used to seeing it on him that it feels as if some small piece of him has been stolen.

“There should be weekly deliveries of supplies for you,” Luo Binghe says. “Food and water.”

And also just to check and see whether the guards are still alive, really. There are talismans that can be used to alert people from a far distance that something is wrong, but any simple two person outpost could be overwhelmed or taken by surprise before any alarms could be set off.

“There aren’t,” Gongyi Xiao says simply. “It has been decided that it would be more practical for me to simply rely on inedia.”

“How long have you been here?” he demands. One of his hands has curled around the railing, squeezing it tight. “On this guard detail?”

“I don’t know,” Gongyi Xiao says. He gives a wry, humorless little quirk of the mouth that doesn’t reach his eyes. “The days all look the same here, really. It makes it difficult to keep count.”

“How long do you have left?” he presses insistently. No one is given this sort of guard duty *permanently;* that way would lead to madness. It’s a *temporary* position. “How long until you’re recalled?”

He’s half expecting another *I don’t know,* but instead Gongyi Xiao says, “I won’t be.”

And he says no more.

It bursts out of him: “Is this what you think of me? Is *this* what you think I’m going to do to you?”

“Isn’t it?” Gongyi Xiao asks. “Get rid of me, put me away somewhere I can’t get in your way, where I can’t influence anyone and everyone can comfortably forget me. That’s what you’re meant to do to me.”

“I wouldn’t assign you to such an awful detail,” Luo Binghe argues fiercely, even as a part of him looks at this set up and recognizes that it would be *perfect* for his aims. “I wouldn’t leave you to *rot!* I wouldn’t isolate you, starve you!”

Gongyi Xiao looks unmoved by this touching promise that Luo Binghe wouldn’t put him in a situation *as bad* as this one. He still doesn’t turn his gaze away from the horizon. It’s gradually driving him mad, that aloof refusal to even *look at him.*

“Why would you even allow me to do such a thing, if this is what you think I have in store for you?” he demands, incensed and desperate for a reaction of any kind. “Why would you *stay here?* Just leave. You have your sword, don’t you? Fly away! There’s nothing stopping you!”

“If I abandoned my duty here,” Gongyi Xiao says, “then I would be completely exiled from my sect forever.”

Luo Binghe is already opening his mouth to snap something about how he's *already* exiled from his sect in this dream in all the ways that matter - but then on that last word, on *forever,* Gongyi Xiao's calm and steady voice cracks. It freezes Luo Binghe silent.

Gongyi Xiao raises one hand - Luo Binghe can see how it trembles in the air - and drags it down his lower face, as if he's physically trying to force a mask back into place. He blinks rapidly, swallows thickly.

"This is better," he says, and there's a strained rasp to the edges of his words now. "This is better than-- than dying. I'm just put out of the way, where no one is ever going to see or hear from me again. I get to just live a quiet life. I don't ever-- I don't get to see Fu-shimei again. I don't get to see Xie-shimei or Pan-shidi, or read the rest of the books in the library, or walk through the gardens, or-- but it's *not that bad.* I'm just not relevant any longer. So what? Who wants to be relevant? I'm just not ever allowed to go back *home--"*

His voice splinters so terribly that he has to stop talking, has to stop breathing for a long moment. He hangs his head, as if to try and hide his face.

"Fuck," he breathes. "Fuck, fucking shit. *Goddamnit.* This is such *bullshit!* I didn't mean to get so attached!"

"Attached," Luo Binghe hears himself say. "To what?"

"To *everything.* To the people, to the palace, to my position as Head Disciple. I always knew it was only a matter of time before I'd lose it all, and yet I'm still acting like such a weepy bitch about it! I *knew better,* and I still let myself grow comfortable. Why? It's so *stupid.* It's pointless getting upset over something that you can't stop from happening. I should have just enjoyed it while I could, and then let go easily when the time came. But instead--"

Gongyi Xiao's breath hitches as he remonstrates himself, as if growing attached to his *own life* is foolishness, and he has to stop just to breathe for a moment. When he continues his voice is tight and wavering, like he's viciously trying to control it. He has a hand up, pressed down over his eyes, covering them.

"It was always going to happen," he croaks. "I tried to just not think about it, but now it's here and I'm *scared.* I don't want to lose everything and everyone I've ever had here."

All at once, the desolate landscape makes sense to Luo Binghe. The complete and utter absence of any sort of softness or kindness, not a spec of generosity or comfort around them. There exists an entire world of things and places and people outside of Huan Hua Palace to discover and explore and get to know, but it doesn't matter. Gongyi Xiao has only ever known the palace, and he's being removed from it by force. He's not venturing out into the world for curiosity or adventure. He's being cast out.

The reason why he imagines his fate to be so cruel is because that's exactly how it feels to be pried away from his only home.

"What am I going to do?" Gongyi Xiao asks, and for the first time he looks at Luo Binghe, his hand falling to his lap. "Who am I going to be now?"

It's the first time Luo Binghe has ever seen Gongyi Xiao cry.

He realizes that Meng Mo was right. Finding out whether Gongyi Xiao knows he's a demon or not is a flimsy excuse at best that he hasn't seriously pursued in a long time now. Somehow, this momentous suspicion has dropped down the ladder of relevance, overshadowed by larger, more urgent concerns.

Luo Binghe needs to know why Gongyi Xiao isn't doing anything to protect himself, because he can't understand why he wouldn't. No - because he can't *stand* that he isn't. That's the only real reason he keeps dragging this out, refusing to make that final blow. But that is its own brand of cruelty, isn't it? To keep Gongyi Xiao caught and trapped in this torturous process for as long as possible, like killing an animal slowly instead of just putting it out of its misery.

He feels a cold, deliberate calm wash over him as he finally makes up his mind over what to do. This could only ever end in one way. He should have seen that sooner.

"I'm sorry, Gongyi-shixiong," Luo Binghe says, and he finds that he really means it. When was the last time he uttered an apology in sincerement? "I promise you I'll put an end to this."

He reaches forward and wipes one of Gongyi Xiao's tears away with his thumb, making the other man startle. He touches his own face, and then frowns. He roughly wipes at the rest of the wetness with his sleeves, seeming almost annoyed by himself. Embarrassed.

"You don't ever spare anyone," Gongyi Xiao says. "Why should it be any different for me?"

"I don't," Luo Binghe agrees. He looks around at the barren landscape, this lonely outpost without a single soul or creature comfort to accompany Gongyi Xiao for the rest of his days. "But you deserve at least better than this."

Then he reaches forward, and with a single, sweeping motion he rends and tears the entirety of that dead and featureless sky to tatters. The empty horizon, that unbroken sprawl of dirt and nothingness, the endless drawn out suffering of the abandoned outpost. He claws and crushes it all to pieces, because he *will not* allow this to be Gongyi Xiao's fate. He refuses.

Gongyi Xiao gets out a single cut off "Binghe--" before the dream collapses in on itself like the shoddy, subpar, unacceptable ending it always was.

Chapter End Notes

There is some more new lovely fanart for this fic now by fruitcode!

And then even more great fanart by softandworm!

More lovely fanart by tulip_leaf!

And then more lovely fanart by yilingpatriargh!

The Luochan River

Chapter Summary

Sometimes, Luo Binghe can't sleep.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 8.7k words long.

Some messed up stuff happens in this chapter, so check the endnotes for warnings if desired.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometimes, Luo Binghe can't sleep. He will lie curled up in a tight ball on his bed, every muscle taut as a wire, his jaw clenched so tight that his teeth ache with it, every inch of him tense, only remembering to inhale when his lungs start to burn.

He thinks about how Shen Qingqiu is out there, unharmed and unaffected by everything he's ever done to Luo Binghe. He thinks about every bone he ever broke and every drop of blood he ever shed down in the Abyss, and how Shen Qingqiu must have never noticed any of it. Every time Luo Binghe suffered pain or terror down in the depths where no sane or living creature should ever exist, Shen Qingqiu was residing in his serene little Bamboo Hut on his peaceful Qing Jing Peak, not knowing or caring a thing for the disciple he had cast away as an abomination.

When Luo Binghe had most of his skin burned off by the scalding breath of a Scarlet Steam Salamander, Shen Qingqiu was drinking tea. When Luo Binghe was cramming his entire body into a hole in a cave too small for him so that his shoulder dislocated because he was delirious and desperate for sleep and couldn't find a safer place, Shen Qingqiu was practicing the guqin. When Luo Binghe was so hungry that he considered eating his own fingers and letting his healing take care of the injuries, Shen Qingqiu was fucking *meditating*.

If the world were fair, then his shizun would have felt every inch of suffering that Luo Binghe went through due to his actions as they happened. Their agonies should have been linked, so that Luo Binghe could have found *some* vindictive solace in his pain. He could have dug his claws into his own wounds, and felt a cold and vicious satisfaction at imagining Shen Qingqiu collapsing in pain up on his pretty little peak.

But the world isn't fair. And so instead, the only thing he had to fuel him in the Eternal Abyss had been the burning determination to claw his way back up to the surface so he could *fix* that little oversight. *Hatred* had kept him alive and moving. It's the only reason he found the strength to survive, the only reason he's still alive today. That choking, overwhelming fury at the idea of quietly dying down in that pit *just like Shen Qingqiu wanted.*

He's out now. He's been out for some time, and yet the hatred is still there. He'd clung to it tightly and desperately, and it nestled its way deep into his bones and his lungs and his sinews. He can feel it when he breathes, lodged inside of him where he can't get it out. It's the only reason he's still alive, but sometimes it won't let him sleep. Sometimes it won't let him *breathe.*

It won't let go of him until he's vomited it up onto someone else, until he's purged himself of his misery. It won't leave him until he manages to grind every inch of suffering Shen Qingqiu ever dealt him into the man's face, and-- and that's *so much* suffering. That's *years* of suffering. How could he possibly hope to make Shen Qingqiu feel all of it? *Can* he even feel it? Could that cold, wretched man ever understand the determined hope Luo Binghe had felt upon first entering his sect, and how it had felt to have it crushed over and over again? Or is his heart simply too small and petty to ever comprehend it?

He'll have to draw his torture out for as long as he can possibly keep him alive, to make up for it. He needs Shen Qingqiu to truly *understand* what he did, and to regret it with every fiber of his being. He needs the man to look him in the eye and beg for forgiveness, and to then *deny him.* Only then will he be able to breathe freely again.

A person who is in great enough pain will say anything *to make it stop, whether it's the truth or not.* Gongyi Xiao's words, down in the Water Prison.

Gongyi Xiao. He's never done a thing to Luo Binghe, not even in rightful retaliation. Never done a thing to anyone, as far as he can see. He couldn't be farther from Shen Qingqiu if he tried. If Luo Binghe stopped this - stopped sabotaging him, stopped undermining him, stopped *hurting* him - then Gongyi Xiao would let him get away with it. He wouldn't get revenge, no matter how deserved. Luo Binghe knows this about him, as much as he'd like to believe differently. There is nothing preventing Luo Binghe from just *stopping.*

Except for how he can't. Except for how it eats at him that Shen Qingqiu continues to go unpunished, and that if he doesn't do something about it then it will never stop eating him until there's nothing left. Shen Qingqiu must die. There is no other option.

Collateral damage is unavoidable.

He wakes up in darkness, Gongyi Xiao's voice still ringing in his ears from that barren dream. Xin Mo is already in his hand, even though it hadn't been when he'd gone to sleep. It sighs and croons in his mind, impatient and demanding like a cat scratching gouges into the other side of a thin door. It's overdue for a feeding, a release, needy and turbulent.

"Wait," he tells it sternly, and then he gets up. He doesn't bother with searching for shoes or outer robes, and he leaves his hair in a loose tumble of curls. It doesn't matter.

There will be no more delaying. He knows exactly what he has to do, and waiting for sunrise won't change it. He'll do it now.

Bracing his feet, he draws his sword. It *sings,* starving and grasping, but he knows only he can hear it. He tilts his head, narrows his eyes, assesses - and *slices* into the air, in the exact right spot. His demonic qi roils and surges as he finally lets it flow through him again, just so he can strain every one of his muscles as far as he possibly can as he *drags* Xin Mo through the air. It's worse than cutting through rock, leaving him trembling from the effort of it, but it doesn't matter. He still makes the world bleed.

The world bleeds black like the void, the wound tearing open in the hanging air slowly and painfully, yawning wider and wider with every inch further he shoves his blade. The entire time, he keeps a single location in mind. When it's open wide enough he's left gasping for breath, but he can see the tell tale glimmer of water through it. Good; it's the right place.

Then he moves three steps to the side and does it *again,* this time for a place he's never been at all. But he knows exactly where it is; he'd made sure to learn it as soon as he could, without calling attention to his own interest. He'd had vague ideas for how to use the information in the future, but he'd never stopped to consider something as crude and straightforward as this.

Luo Binghe painstakingly opens up a portal leading into the Head Disciple's private quarters. His blood rushes frantically in his ears, Xin Mo's hunger *incessant* in his mind, but he knows that he really does it in dead silence. When he's done the ragged gash hangs there, and there is no commotion or movement from the other side. Only the peaceful dark solitude of someone's home at night.

He steps through, quietly breaking that solitude into pieces. He tries to look around himself only long enough to orient himself, but can't help but notice details regardless: a messily piled heap of books on a low table, one of them with a hair ribbon sticking out of it as an improvised bookmark; a wobbly clay pot that looks amateurishly made, with the characters *Gongyi-shixiong* etched into the side, arranged in pride of place like a beloved collectors item; a forgotten, used tea bowl, a comfortable little bit of messiness.

Ignore it.

Luo Binghe moves through the darkness like a creature made for it. He finds Gongyi Xiao's bedroom on the first try, and sees the shape of his body through the sheets. He's on the uneasy edge of sleep after having his dream shattered by Luo Binghe earlier.

For just a moment, he only looks at him. Sees him lying there, his breathing slow and gentle, his features shadowed but soft.

Then he lunges for him. He descends on Gongyi Xiao like a pouncing animal, letting all of his weight fall on him, abandoning subtlety in a rush. Gongyi Xiao flies awake at once, jerking upwards underneath the cage of Luo Binghe's body, a groggy, confused, panicked *"what--?!"* yelping out of him.

“Gongyi-shixiong,” Luo Binghe says, feeling eerily calm. Xin Mo rushes through his veins like blood, like ice water, and it leaves him feeling strangely steady in its wake. All the steps are laid out in front of him so clearly, so simply. “Please pardon the intrusion. I want to take you somewhere.”

“What,” Gongyi Xiao says again. He doesn’t sound any less bewildered or disoriented.

Without another word, Luo Binghe grabs Gongyi Xiao and *hoists* him up. Gongyi Xiao sucks in a sharp breath as Luo Binghe stands and settles him over his shoulder in a fluid movement, seeming too shocked to resist. He manages to turn around and fully exit the bedroom before Gongyi Xiao starts to struggle.

“Let me *down--!”* he says, writhing with no leverage, and his voice starts out loud before he quickly cuts himself off, as if - what? Like he *doesn’t want to wake anyone up?*

“Binghe,” he hisses in a whisper, before quickly correcting himself to, “Luo-shidi, what are you *doing?”*

He really is trying to be quiet. He should be shouting and caterwauling to draw as many witnesses as possible to Luo Binghe’s outrageous behavior, and instead he’s *being quiet.* What, is he afraid that it would be *impolite* of him? Is he worried about *inconveniencing* anyone?

“Put me down, and we can talk about this,” Gongyi Xiao whispers, low but fast.

Or even worse - is he trying to protect Luo Binghe from the consequences of his own actions yet again?

“This is ridiculous,” Gongyi Xiao says, so freshly awakened that the thread of anxiety is clear in his voice, not immediately hidden.

There’s absolutely no reason for why he would do such a thing, but Gongyi Xiao has *never* had a reason for being kind to Luo Binghe. It hasn’t stopped him yet.

“Just wait and see, Gongyi-shixiong,” Luo Binghe says.

This reassurance is enough to make Gongyi Xiao summon his sword at once. Luo Binghe is pleased; yes, Gongyi Xiao *should* bring his spiritual weapon with him. He quickens his steps to outrun the sword before it can reach them, jumping through Xin Mo’s portal so that he doesn’t even touch foot within his own quarters before flying through the first opening he made, landing on grassy ground. At once, the air tastes different. It’s cold and clear and open, no traces of human scents in it.

He dumps Gongyi Xiao on the ground, who instantly rolls up onto his feet and takes several, hurried steps away from Luo Binghe until there’s a wary distance between them. Jin Ren, his sword, flies into his hand, the pommel smacking into his palm like two interlocking pieces meant for each other. He looks around himself frantically, assessing his surroundings.

Above them, the night sky hangs unhindered and unobstructed, a deep blue-black speckled with brilliant stars and a full moon. There are no buildings in sight, no people. There are trees off in the distance, grass beneath them, and to the side of them - a river. It is deep and black, its currents swift and powerful enough to sweep up and drown an ox, the water as cold as ice.

It's the Luochan River. The exact spot where the Huan Hua Palace patrol had first found him, in fact.

When Gongyi Xiao speaks, his voice sounds forced and tense. That's fair; he's been abducted out of his bed in the dead of the night, taken far away from his crowded and familiar palace to a cold and isolated wilderness in the blink of an eye. What thoughts are running through his head right now?

"What is the meaning of this, Shidi?" he asks, as if he's honestly trying to pull *rank* in this situation.

Luo Binghe turns to him, having finished closing Xin Mo's opening during Gongyi Xiao's distraction. They're trapped together now, here on the coast of his namesake. There will be no retreat.

He twists Xin Mo so that its cruel edge catches the moonlight, and he sees Gongyi Xiao's gaze flicker towards it.

"What do *you* think, Shixiong?" he asks, and his voice sounds as cold as the river, as sharp as his sword. "What do you think my meaning is?"

"... If this is about what you told me the other day," Gongyi Xiao says slowly, cautiously, "then you should know that I didn't put much stock in it. You were clearly emotional; you were speaking nonsense--"

Luo Binghe draws Xin Mo back and slashes it through the air, a broad swing that throws as large of a sword glare as he can possibly summon. It screams through the air, tearing up the earth, and Gongyi Xiao has to throw his entire body to the side to evade it. He falls into a roll and pops back up onto his feet, the edges of his eyes white all the way around.

The furrow in the earth is deep enough to bury a man in, and is at least twenty feet in length, steam rising from the torn dirt. Not even Luo Binghe had expected it to be that large; his demonic qi had eagerly leapt out of him at the slightest opportunity, like a built up dam escaping through a narrow crack.

"Would you shrug your shoulders and lay still if a skinner demon asked you politely enough?" He starts to walk slowly, and Gongyi Xiao turns so as to not take his eyes off him for even a moment, moving to preserve the distance between them.

"What?" Gongyi Xiao asks. He's breathing hard, the adrenaline hitting his system only now as his body realizes that he just came within a hair's edge of being obliterated. His hair is in a loose, simple braid for sleep, his feet bare. He's wearing nothing but a simple, single layer of

a robe, not a speck of gold on him - no. There's a glint of gold at the nape of his neck, just barely glimpsed past the edge of the collar of his robe. A chain.

His medallion.

"You're scared?" Luo Binghe asks, his voice hard and brittle all at once. "You don't want to go?"

"I don't--" Gongyi Xiao says, so many steps behind. Luo Binghe made him forget his dreams. He doesn't remember any of what Luo Binghe's talking about. He must sound crazy.

He *feels* crazy. He feels wild, unstoppable, uncontrollable. It's not a pleasant feeling, but it is the sort of feeling that lets you know that you can't slow down or stop, or else you'll waver and fall - and it's a long way to the bottom.

"Then *prove it!"* He abruptly moves to close the distance between him and Gongyi Xiao, who recoils from him dramatically - and realizes just in time that Luo Binghe has backed him up against the edge of the river, staggering so that he doesn't fall into the icy water. Instead, he has no choice but to try and catch the pommel of Xin Mo with Jin Ren's, the swords locked against each other.

But he's off balance and his sword isn't even unsheathed yet, and so Luo Binghe breaks through the maneuver easily. He grabs Jin Ren with his bare hand and *shoves* it aside, and then Gongyi Xiao is open open open, and Luo Binghe is slashing his sword down towards Gongyi Xiao's chest, his *throat*--

Gongyi Xiao gasps sharply and then ducks down, avoiding Xin Mo so narrowly that Luo Binghe manages to cut off a few stray strands of hair. Black silk that gets caught in the wind and blown into the water at once. He throws himself forward into Luo Binghe's gut elbow first, and Luo Binghe allows it to move him instead of taking the full impact of the blow. He doesn't want the two of them to tumble into the river. He wants--

"Unsheathe your sword," he hisses, moving only far enough back so that he has room to maneuver Xin Mo. "This is a *fight."*

"It doesn't have to be," Gongyi Xiao entreaties quickly, like trying to reason with an animal deadset on tearing out his throat. Luo Binghe can see his gaze flitting desperately around, searching for an escape route. He already knows that he can't just fly, he'd be leaving himself wide open to be torn out of the sky with a sword glare thrown from the ground. He takes a step to the side, trying to remove himself from the uncomfortable position of being trapped between Luo Binghe and the river.

Luo Binghe follows him. "Stop trying to run away. I'm not going to let you. Draw your *sword,* Shixiong. This isn't a spar, and it isn't an ambush."

"Isn't it?!" Gongyi Xiao asks, his voice peaking with incredulity for just a moment. He doesn't stop trying to retreat, even as Luo Binghe hounds him. "I don't remember agreeing to this fight!"

“I’m not giving you a *choice.* If you refuse to fight me, I’ll just kill you where you stand. I’ll run you through with Xin Mo and toss you into the river to bleed out and drown. *Or--”* and he can’t stop himself from baring his teeth at Gongyi Xiao, animalistic and demonic, “--you could *fight for yourself.* Which will it be?”

Gongyi Xiao looks at him, white faced and wide eyed at the threat. One of his hands moves a little up, as if to touch his own throat - or the chain that hangs around it. But it stops short.

“That isn’t--” he says, takes a wavering breath - and then his expression deliberately smooths out again, calm and opaque. “That isn’t necessary, Luo-shidi. I’ll surrender my position to you without a fight. I’ll give you--”

The image of Gongyi Xiao politely handing over his golden medallion to Luo Binghe like a present flashes through his mind, and it’s so awful that he moves with a desperation to stop it from happening. He lunges for Gongyi Xiao with Xin Mo held point first, as if to spear it through the man’s midsection, and Gongyi Xiao has no choice but to dodge again, quick and frantic. Xin Mo manages to rip at the edge of his robe, but there’s no blood.

“Surrendering is *not an option,”* he snarls. “If you want to live, then you’ll have to fight for it!”

All he wants in the world is for Gongyi Xiao to fight him. To push back against him, to fucking *try.* A sword to his throat will do that, won’t it? It *has to.*

“Why?!” Gongyi Xiao demands, his voice sharp with fear and adrenaline, and he almost looks *indignant.* “If I’m already giving you what you want, why are you threatening to *kill me* for it? Just overshadow me until I’m insignificant! What did I do to make *this* happen?!”

“You did nothing,” Luo Binghe says. He charges Xin Mo with a sword glare so that it crackles and hums eagerly, a loud and obvious warning. “You did *nothing!”*

Gongyi Xiao’s eyes widen, and he finally, *finally* unsheathes his sword. Its blade shines pure and clean in the moonlight, and it cuts smoothly through the air to smash Xin Mo to the side just as Luo Binghe lets the sword glare loose, making its trajectory veer wildly off course. Cold water sprays up into the night air, coming down to land on his skin like rain.

The risk of a sword glare is that after the very first moment of unleashing it you leave yourself vulnerable, overextended. Luo Binghe’s guard is open now, and Gongyi Xiao is so very close, close enough to press and push--

But instead he darts back, surrendering the opportunity for a chance to put more distance between them. It’s *infuriating.* Luo Binghe has *seen* him fight properly before, blood flying through the air, life or death stakes hanging in the balance. On the mission with the Shredder Hyenas. This is *not* how Gongyi Xiao fights when it's for real, when he’s doing everything he can to win and survive. He’s fighting like he’s only trying to survive the next swing of the sword, the next attack. He’s barely fighting at all.

“If you don’t at least make me bleed, I’ll make it *slow* too,” he throws out, before descending on Gongyi Xiao with his sword. Gongyi Xiao dodges and weaves as if he knows exactly how

cruel Xin Mo is, how greedy and eager its edge, how it somehow always manages to take the slightest opportunity to leave ugly, painful wounds behind in its wake. A cut from Xin Mo bleeds more than a cut from any other blade.

He doesn't try to counterattack, doesn't attempt to cut Luo Binghe himself. Perhaps it's because he's so desperate and focused on protecting himself that he can't find the air or focus to spare for it, but Luo Binghe knows too well just how crisp and polished his fighting skills are. Gongyi Xiao *could* make the attempt. He *could* make Luo Binghe bleed if he tried.

But he isn't.

"And I'll burn all your belongings to ash, I'll leave your body to sink in the river, and I'll smear your name before turning it into a taboo - I'll erase all trace of you! So just *cut me--!"*

Jin Ren flies out, and it's so unexpected that it almost slices down Luo Binghe's entire front. Instead, he manages to recoil just in time so that all he gets is a shallow cut to the chest, the sort that'll be closed and healed before the fight is even over. It's barely anything - but it's *something.* Wild triumph surges up his throat like bile.

"What the fuck do you want from me?!" Gongyi Xiao demands, and Luo Binghe sees now that with each swipe of his blade that his anger has been rising. He looks terrified and bewildered and *furious*. "I did *everything* I was supposed to! I was ready to lose everything just to play my part in the-- in your plans! Why isn't that good enough for you?! What more could you *possibly* want?!"

"I don't remember *asking* you for your cooperation!" Luo Binghe snaps back, striking out with his sword as if to make the words sink in along with the edge. This time, Xin Mo manages to graze a long red stripe up Gongyi Xiao's right arm so that he makes a small, breathless noise of pain. Luo Binghe sucks in his breath, unprepared for actually making contact, feeling - but then Xin Mo's gleeful excitement blots out whatever he feels, flaring and eager for more like a fed fire inside of his skull.

"What - you want the pleasure of stealing it against my will?" Gongyi Xiao asks, his voice tight with fiercely controlled pain. He doesn't even look at the cut on his arm, only adjusts his grip on his sword, shifting his stance in anticipation of another strike. "I'm making it too easy on you, so it isn't satisfying? You want to see me struggle and fail? Is that it?"

"No!" Luo Binghe shouts so loudly that for a moment it drowns out the rushing of the river itself. "That's not what I want! I want--"

I want to lose.

The realization strikes him mute. His sword strike goes clumsy and off kilter, enough so that Luo Binghe knows that Gongyi Xiao could've skewered him through if only he'd taken the opportunity. Maybe he'd thought it had only been a bluff, unable to believe that such a glaring opening would be anything but a trap.

Luo Binghe imagines winning. He imagines slicing Gongyi Xiao's throat open, plunging Xin Mo through his heart. He imagines his stunned, pained eyes, staring at Luo Binghe as he sets

a hand to his chest and simply pushes him. Backwards into the river, over the edge. He imagines cutting his way back into Huan Hua Palace, and going to bed as if nothing ever happened. He imagines *getting away with it,* unharmed and unaffected by everything he ever did to Gongyi Xiao.

He feels *sick.* The unfairness of it, the *cruelty,* is awful beyond words.

Luo Binghe takes too long to strike at him again, and so Gongyi Xiao does it for him. He parries automatically, his body moving to defend him without thought. He distantly notes that Gongyi Xiao had gone for his shoulder. Not his throat, not his stomach, not anything that might have meant death for Luo Binghe if he'd scored a hit. Even now, he isn't going for killshots. He isn't fighting hard enough.

Luo Binghe hadn't fought back against Shen Qingqiu, that day at the edge of the Abyss. He'd just begged and cried. He'd just *let him do it.* There's no way he could have beat him, but the fact *gnaws* at him. He acts as if he can't understand why Gongyi Xiao does nothing, but he should be able to understand better than anyone. That's why he *needs* Gongyi Xiao to fight.

But if there is a fight then there must be someone who wins, and someone who loses.

"I want you to stop treating me like I'm an inevitability," he rasps. Gongyi Xiao slashes for him again - low this time, aiming for his damned *leg* - and Luo Binghe has the fleeting thought to just let it hit. This should hurt. He wants it to hurt. "Like a force of nature, a fact of reality. I am a *person* who is *hurting you!"*

"You're not--" Gongyi Xiao starts, and then stops as he has to hastily parry a hit from Luo Binghe, the tip of Xin Mo so close to his face that the very point of it grazes a thin, red curving line into his cheek as he pushes it aside. Except he'd stopped a moment before that. As if he'd been about to say *you're not hurting me,* and realized that he doesn't have the thinnest of justifications for that argument now.

"Diminishing you," Luo Binghe snaps. "Whatever you want to call it! I've been sabotaging you, using all of my powers of manipulation to undermine you! Just to steal your position! I've had malicious intentions from the very beginning. Deliberate, greedy, *selfish.* Act like it! Why are you letting me do this?!"

Worse, why does he keep being *kind* to him?

He remembers bowing to Shen Qingqiu, obeying Shen Qingqiu, showing respect to Shen Qingqiu far past the point that the man should have lost that right. As if he'd one day begin rewarding Luo Binghe for his loyalty, would suddenly start being fair when he never had been before.

Gongyi Xiao's eyes widen as Luo Binghe speaks, and at his final question he actually falters, his sword stance wavering for just the slightest of moments. He almost looks *concerned.*

Unlike Gongyi Xiao, Luo Binghe instinctively exploits vulnerabilities and opportunities like it's second nature. He lets go of Xin Mo immediately, crouching, diving in low beneath Gongyi Xiao's guard - and he tackles him to the ground. They land on the dew-wet grass with

a painful thump that knocks the air out of Gongyi Xiao in an audible wheeze, and Luo Binghe is on top of him, one knee pinning his sword hand and sword to the ground with crushing force. They're close enough to the edge of the river that some of Gongyi Xiao's hair is in the water.

Gongyi Xiao blinks up at him, looking dazed and winded. His eyes are so wide and dark.

Luo Binghe shouldn't win. If this were a story, a play, then he wouldn't win. He'd be defeated, slayed like the filthy demon he is. The imposter, the monster that snuck and lied his way into a sect, with nothing but selfish hatred in his heart. Gongyi Xiao would smite him, would survive, would be victorious and rewarded and safe and protected for the rest of his days. All would be right with the world.

But this isn't a play. It's true, what Gongyi Xiao said: Luo Binghe is stronger than him. Gongyi Xiao might have a hope if he only *tried,* but he isn't, not really - and even if he did, Luo Binghe would still be stronger. The only way he'll be stopped is if he stops on his own, and he can't do that. He's made promises to demon clans. He has his plans. He has the hatred that drove him to survive the Eternal Abyss, and is now demanding its fair pound of flesh in repayment. He *has to* do this.

He wishes Gongyi Xiao could stop him.

"You should have fought harder," Luo Binghe says, and the sharp, raw edge to his voice is gone now, sapped away into something quiet and hoarse. "It's better to die fighting."

Gongyi Xiao's gaze travels past Luo Binghe's face - and his eyes widen in horror as he spots Xin Mo, hovering vertically above them in the air. Its point aimed directly at his face, set to spear downwards and lance him like a lightning bolt.

Luo Binghe knows that he's going to win not just because he has Gongyi Xiao pinned and beneath his sword, but because that's how the world works. It's ugly and unfair. He doesn't want to keep tarnishing Gongyi Xiao, the Golden Head Disciple. He doesn't want to get away with it. But he's going to, because that's how it works, isn't it? The cruelest person always wins.

And he's cruel now.

He grabs the fine golden chain hanging around Gongyi Xiao's neck, pulling on it, drawing it out from beneath his robes.

"I'll at least grant you the courtesy of finality," he says. "Of not lingering in a world that has broken you. I'll make it quick, Gongyi-shixiong."

If Luo Binghe is a twisted shadow of his former self, warped and tainted by the Abyss, by that grand and final betrayal, then he doesn't want to see what Gongyi Xiao will look like after this. Gongyi Xiao shouldn't have to see it either. It's the least he deserves.

He draws the golden medallion from Gongyi Xiao's robes, intent on snatching it from his very neck, snapping the chain like cheap twine, this one last gesture of violent greed before

he--

Except that's not the golden medallion. It's… a glass ball? Filled with *dirt?* He tries to hold it up to the moonlight to see it more clearly-- and that's when Gongyi Xiao shoves it against Luo Binghe's chest with his free hand, a qi blast ripping out of his palm, glass breaking.

All at once, everything goes wrong.

Roots spring forth and grow out of the dirt with the speed of a spreading wildfire, of water rushing down a fierce river, of lightning cracking across the sky. They spread down his chest to his stomach and his legs, upwards towards his shoulders and throat, wrapping around him towards his back and neck, trapping one arm against his chest and the other to his side.

"What is--?!" he says, and then his own voice erupts into a shocked cry of pain as they burrow into his *flesh,* laying root underneath his skin, in his muscles, his sinews--

--deeper still than that--

--and he feels something that has always been nestled deep inside of him, safe and untouchable, be *drawn on.* Like roots drinking in the moisture beneath the earth to nurture themselves, they leech something from him now that he had thought inviolable to himself. Impossible to steal.

The roots are draining him of his demonic qi. He can feel it - the strength sapping out of him, the sheer wrongness of it *blinding* him. Distantly, he feels his body hit the ground, temple against the grass. Hears breathless noises of agony. Hands on his body, turning him onto his back. A voice close by--

"--inghe?! Oh god, they were supposed to wrap *around you,* not *into* you--!"

Luo Binghe blinks his eyes, his vision coming back to him by degrees until he can make out Gongyi Xiao hovering over him, looking pale faced and panicked. His braid is a disaster; there are grass and blood stains on his robes and his face.

Instinctively, he reaches intangibly for Xin Mo. His qi shifts in his veins to lift it-- and a ragged scream tears out of his throat as the roots inside of him eagerly crawl through him towards the stirring qi, sucking it into themselves. He can't reach Xin Mo, can't even touch it with his mind. The disappearance of its constant presence is a shock, like losing a limb - or a tumor, something that had grown so large inside of him that he hadn't even noticed its sheer size until its sudden absence leaves him feeling lightheaded and disoriented.

He strains his arms, his legs, tries to *tear himself* free - and gets nowhere. The roots drink of him, leaving him faint and weak. He doesn't even have the strength to lift his head.

"Stop it!" Gongyi Xiao urges him. "Stop it, Binghe, you're only making it worse."

He realizes that it's true. That he can't move, can't use his qi. He had been looming over Gongyi Xiao only moments ago, feeling that awful empty void inside of his chest grow and yawn wider and wider as he'd steeled himself to bring down his blade - and now he isn't any

longer. Now he's the one on his back on the ground, helpless and defeated. Now Gongyi Xiao is the one looming over him, above him, victorious. Now--

He laughs. It comes out weak and drunk, and the way it jostles his body against the roots hurts so very badly. But he still can't stop the smile that stretches across his face.

"You beat me," he breathes, shocked and disbelieving. He had resigned himself to the impossibility of it, but then Gongyi Xiao had gone and done it anyway. He should be terrified, furious - but all he feels is an exhausted, *grateful* relief. Gongyi Xiao looks incredulous as well, like he hadn't really been expecting it to work. "I was going to kill you, and you--"

"Why?" Gongyi Xiao bursts out. "You weren't supposed to kill me. Why did you-- why would you even try?"

"To give you the closure of death," Luo Binghe says. "Instead of a dragged out life filled with suffering."

It had made all the sense in the world to him. Although, saying it out loud *now* it sounds a little--

"Fuck you!" Gongyi Xiao shouts, looking livid and wild eyed. Looking beautiful. "Ask first!! I'll take the life of suffering, fuck you very much!!!"

"Okay," he says dumbly, staring up at Gongyi Xiao with something that feels like reverence. "Sorry."

Gongyi Xiao pauses awkwardly, as if he doesn't know what to do with the easy surrender. As if he doesn't have Luo Binghe entirely at his mercy, could demand anything of him that he might wish for. In this moment, he would give it all to him happily and without regret. Losing has never felt like this before. Like a gift, like a *miracle*--

--like dozens of root tendrils squirming slowly inside of his flesh, blood welling thickly from the points of entry.

"What," he croaks - shudders with pain as the roots pierce just a little deeper inside of him - and tries again. "What is this thing?"

"... This is the Drinking Hungry Roots Plant. Only to be found deep within the Demon Realm, it…" Gongyi Xiao's eyes flick up to Luo Binghe's face. No - his forehead. "It sprouts on contact with demonic qi, and consumes it to subsist itself."

His demon mark burns hot and exposed on his forehead. He can't see himself, but he suddenly knows that his eyes must shine blood red in the moonlight. His ugly black claws sprouting from his fingers, exposing him for what he is. He's been unveiled, nothing left to hide him or his nature. Gongyi Xiao sees him, and he--

He doesn't look shocked.

Of course he isn't. He wouldn't know to prepare such a plant unless he already knew that it would be the perfect weapon against him.

"How long have you known?" Luo Binghe asks. He's in such pain, but some of his wounds are beginning to go a little numb at the edges. Not a good sign.

"... from the beginning," Gongyi Xiao says. He's a liar, and yet Luo Binghe has never been more certain that he's telling the truth.

"Are you going to tell me how?"

Gongyi Xiao says nothing, his gaze sinking down to the roots wrapped around and into Luo Binghe instead.

"Good," he says. Gongyi Xiao's eyes meet his. "Don't. You're finally learning to preserve yourself."

But maybe he never really had to learn. How long has he had this seed on hand? And where did he--

"The Special Artifacts Room," he says, realization shocking the words out of his own mouth. "You-- you're in charge of security there."

"I was," Gongyi Xiao admits. "I knew I probably wouldn't be any longer after the theft, but I didn't want to wait and risk losing the responsibility before I'd gotten my…" He touches one of the roots sprouting out from Luo Binghe's chest with a careful, feather light touch. "... insurance."

"You're the thief." This means-- that theft happened *so long* ago. Gongyi Xiao had it on him all this time - even wore it around his neck and went to *sleep* with it.

"I am," Gongyi Xiao agrees. "That was one of the punishments that I *actually* deserved. Got away easy, really."

"Why?" he asks, once again consumed by the need to know, to understand. "You had that all this time, and you only use it *now?"*

"... you were going to kill me," Gongyi Xiao says, and Luo Binghe remembers that the artifact was stolen shortly after their first mission together. After the first time Gongyi Xiao saw just how far Luo Binghe was willing to go to sabotage him, how he'd endanger anyone unlucky enough to be nearby in order to pursue his goals.

"That was what made you finally act. Not losing your honor, your position, your sect-- only your life."

"If you lose your life, you lose the opportunity to gain anything else."

He looks so beautiful. What had he thought the first time he saw him, that he was 'handsome enough?' Ridiculous. He's never been so wrong in his life. Gongyi Xiao is the most beautiful creature on earth.

He might have been willing to let Luo Binghe steal his life, but never his *life.* He'd never intended to roll all the way over, and had made sure to keep his failsafe on him all this time. He hadn't ever meant to let Luo Binghe kill him. He's so relieved from the discovery that he feels heady with it - or that might be the roots stabbing through him, drinking his qi greedily. Something grazes his cheek, and he can just barely turn his head far enough to see what it is. There are small white flowers blooming from the roots wrapped around him, fed by the fertile soil of his body.

What a pretty way to die.

Gongyi Xiao makes a small, distressed sound at the sight of them, and then he tugs his sleeves over his hands, leaning over to pick something up from the ground - Xin Mo. It doesn't punish him for the sin of daring to hold it. Maybe because Luo Binghe is incapacitated and grounded, or maybe just because he'd carefully made sure to cover his hands first. *He's so clever,* he thinks, overcome with a wave of near delirious admiration.

Then Gongyi Xiao turns his gaze back on Luo Binghe, Xin Mo in his hands, and he thinks *Oh. This is it.*

He doesn't want to leave Luo Binghe to be slowly drained by the roots. He's too kind to the very last moment, and so is going to kill Luo Binghe with his sword instead. Wistfully, he half wishes that Gongyi Xiao would have used Jin Ren instead. It would have been a connection, of a sort. But if he doesn't want to taint his own sword with Luo Binghe's blood even more than he already has, then that's his right.

Gongyi Xiao looms over him, and all he can feel is the rightness, the *correctness* of this ending. Luo Binghe looks up at him, a scuffed and bloodstained mess, the edges of him kissed by moonlight - and he feels as if Gongyi Xiao must have hung all the stars in the sky himself.

"Binghe," Gongyi Xiao says, instead of bringing Xin Mo down into his chest. "Can you hide your demonic qi for me?"

Luo Binghe frowns, mystified by the request. But if Gongyi Xiao wants it, he'll give it. That's his right as the victor.

"I'll try," he says, and then he sucks in his breath and does his best to tuck his demonic qi away, to cloak it like he has so many times before. The roots that have nestled so snugly inside of his body immediately react, and he grunts as they try to chase his qi, awakening numbed nerves. But he's used to pain, and so he grits his teeth and soldiers through it until he feels his demonic features sink away, hiding his true nature.

"Good, good - well done, Binghe, please keep that up for just a little longer," Gongyi Xiao soothes, and then he… holds Xin Mo close to the roots. He doesn't cut them, just presses the flat of the blade against them. Luo Binghe doesn't understand--

A pained gasp escapes him as the roots all *twitch* at once, the flowers all turning towards the sword as if it's the sun. When the first root removes itself from Luo Binghe, snaking out of his wound with a wet sucking sound to tentatively settle along Xin Mo, he almost blacks out

from the agony of it. Then another goes - another, *another* - and then they're all eagerly wrapping themselves around Xin Mo instead, his fresh blood dripping from the roots as they curl around Xin Mo like possessive snakes.

Going for the strongest, loudest source of demonic qi present. Once they've all detached from Luo Binghe, Gongyi Xiao tosses the sword away onto the ground. The roots slither and tighten like a boa constrictor--

And then Xin Mo starts to *scream.* Luo Binghe chokes, second hand pain bleeding through their connection. It trembles and rattles on the ground as if there's an earthquake, white flowers snapping open and blooming in rapid fire succession, eager and hungry and delighted - and then there's a loud *cracking* sound.

Something dislocates inside of Luo Binghe's mind. Some sense of bloodlust, of corruption, so old and familiar that he'd mistaken it for just another piece of himself. It detaches like the bloody roots from his flesh, and suddenly he's just - light. So much lighter than before.

"Oh god," Gongyi Xiao says, incongruously horrified. "Your sword!"

Why is he worrying about Luo Binghe's sword when he's only going to kill him? His mind is such a jumble that when he reaches for an answer he grasps nothing, like misjudging the distance between yourself and an object and missing completely. Gongyi Xiao gives the bundle of happily flowering roots wrapped around Xin Mo one last guilty look, and then he turns his attention back on Luo Binghe.

"Oh, damn," he says, biting his lower lip. His hands hover over Luo Binghe uncertainly, just barely grazing over his skin, like he wants to touch him but is also afraid to do so at the same time. "That's… a lot of blood, shit. Binghe, do you feel faint? Where do you hurt the worst?"

Luo Binghe watches him, not answering, not understanding. Or - like there's a part of him that just refuses to understand what's happening. Gongyi Xiao frets over him, making concerned noises before trying to apply pressure to one of the wounds in his shoulder with his hands. Trying to stem the bleeding. Trying to help him.

He's showing Luo Binghe mercy. He's won, he's defended himself, he has Luo Binghe beaten and defenseless - and now he's *sparing him.* Like that's allowed? Like that's an option? Gongyi Xiao fusses over him like it hasn't even *occurred* to him to cut Luo Binghe down.

Luo Binghe bursts into tears.

"What?!" Gongyi Xiao says, snatching his hands back like they've been burned, bloody in the moonlight. "It hurts that bad?!"

"I don't--" Luo Binghe says, and is then interrupted by a hiccuping hitched breath that hits his chest like a blow. He can't remember the last time he cried like this; big, sloppy tears, sobbing breaths, all of it real real real. He hasn't let himself cry like this in *years,* but now he suddenly can't stop himself at all. If his life relied on him stopping his crying right now then he would simply die. "I don't under-- *understand.* I don't understand!"

“What don’t you understand?!” Gongyi Xiao demands, almost looking more panicked by Luo Binghe’s hysterics than he had at having his life threatened earlier.

He moves as if to reach for Luo Binghe’s face, then stops and wipes the blood away on his own robes, streaks of red on white fabric. He reaches out and cups Luo Binghe’s face, wiping the dripping tears away with his thumbs hurriedly, as if he might make Luo Binghe stop crying entirely if he can only clean away all the tears.

Luo Binghe, not having realized that it was possible, cries even harder. Gongyi Xiao gets right under his skin, stirs his emotions up to the surface like silt.

“Why?” he gasps out, wet and messy like a heartbroken child. “Why are you so *nice* to me?”

Gongyi Xiao looks helplessly down at Luo Binghe and his wounds.

“You call *this* nice?”

“You won’t even *kill me!”* Luo Binghe cries, as if he’s been terribly wronged. “Why not?”

“Why? Well--” Gongyi Xiao sputters, seeming flustered to be asked point blank. “That’s not-- what is this?! Who asks questions like that? Shouldn’t you just be grateful? Are you trying to make me *reconsider?* What even is this? Where’s the badass calmly and serenely accepting his defeat from a minute ago?!”

He doesn’t want to answer. He doesn’t want to answer because he doesn’t have a good reason, because one doesn’t *exist.* It can’t.

But he still isn’t killing Luo Binghe anyway.

“What do you think you’re doing, crying like you’re being tortured?” Gongyi Xiao asks, all concerned scolding. He won’t stop wiping Luo Binghe’s tears away.

“You should cut me down,” Luo Binghe gets out between painfully hitching breaths. “You should-- I tried to, to-- I *tried to--”*

“I know,” Gongyi Xiao says, and there’s a soothing tone to it. He’s so sincerely kind that it kills him, he can barely stand it. “I know, Binghe. I’m sorry. I didn’t know that me not fighting back was making you feel so terrible.”

Hearing it be put so plainly, so simply--

“It’s not fair,” he says, and though it doesn’t come out on a sob this time his voice is still thin and creaks terribly, like ice in spring. “God, you’re so-- I like you. I like you *so much* and I’m-- I’m supposed to *destroy you.* I’m supposed to-- to use you, discard you. I *hate it!* It’s so awf-- awful, I don’t *want to,* I--”

The world is blurry and vague through the tears, but he sees Gongyi Xiao’s face go clear and open with surprise at *I like you.* But as Luo Binghe continues his brow furrows with thought, deliberation.

“Then… then don’t,” he finally says, like it’s just that easy.

“I can’t-- I’m supposed to--”

“You’re not *supposed to* do anything,” Gongyi Xiao contradicts him fiercely. “You’re the-- you’re Luo Binghe! The only person who decides what you do is *you.* You do what you want to do, and everyone else just has to deal with it!”

He says *you’re Luo Binghe* like it means something. Like it means everything.

“Come on,” Gongyi Xiao says. “If ruining me is so upsetting then just stop! You can figure something else out. *We* can figure something else out. Alright? I’ll help. What do you really want, Binghe?”

With Gongyi Xiao looking at him like that, asking him that, the only answer he can think of in the whole world for a long moment is just *you.*

For the first time, Luo Binghe accepts the truth. He’s in love with Gongyi Xiao. He’s felt it for a long time, but he hasn’t let himself truly know it. He’s only been able to bear to look at it sideways until now, fleeting glances out of the corner of his eye at a reality too painful to face. He loves him, he loves him, he *loves him.*

He’d offered his heart up on a platter for so many years, torn it out of the safety of his rib cage and left it out in the open in the hopes that anyone might want it, that someone might pick it up and cherish it. No one ever had.

How is it fair that someone should unknowingly steal it away from him long past the time he’d given up all hope?

“I don’t… I don’t want to be like my shizun,” he says, his crying finally easing into something raw and exhausted and quiet. Tears still slip down the sides of his face, and Gongyi Xiao steadily thumbs them away with a gentleness that feels flaying.

Gongyi Xiao’s face softens at the answer, unbearably and unreasonably fond of him.

“I think you can do that,” he says. “But that’s something you *don’t* want to do. What else?”

I want to look after you for the rest of my life. You draw the line so far back, protect yourself so late. I’ll do it for you.

No. Luo Binghe is going to have to earn the right to make a promise like that, after everything he’s done. Speaking of which--

“If anyone else tries to do to you what I’ve done, I’ll kill them,” Luo Binghe swears.

Gongyi Xiao blinks. “Um. Okay? Is there… anything else, or…?”

His grand plans, his insanely single minded goal of revenge, of clawing his way to the *top* and *power,* all so he could wield it against those that hurt him in the past - he suddenly doesn’t know. He had been willing to sacrifice *Gongyi Xiao* to make them happen, and it

suddenly seems like a delusional exchange. An unworthy bargain, a deal that he'd regret for the rest of his life. He knows now that if he had to choose between the two, he'll choose Gongyi Xiao. Does that mean that he'll choose revenge at all? It's almost a terrifying question to even contemplate, after he's rested his survival on and centered his entire life around the pursuit of it for so long. Is it load bearing? If he takes it away, will he simply collapse, fall into pieces?

"I want…" Luo Binghe says slowly, thinking. "I want to go to bed."

Gongyi Xiao looks at him for a second - and then he barks out a laugh.

"Ha! Yeah, that-- that makes sense, yeah, god. Me too. I shouldn't expect you to reevaluate your entire lifeplan right here and now, it's been a crazy night. We should…"

He looks out over the Luochan river running cold and swift, the grass swaying gently with the wind, all graced by pale moonlight. It's the most beautiful night of Luo Binghe's life. He feels like he's looking at the full moon for the very first time.

Gongyi Xiao sighs.

"Ah," he says. "I just realized that I'll have to fly both of us home tonight."

Chapter End Notes

WARNING: Kidnapping, attempted murder, extreme violence bordering on body horror, and suicidal ideation

Jin Ren: Golden Blade

Next chapter will only be a short epilogue!

Ascension

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 2.6k words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sunshine is a buttery yellow painting the palace's gold in the kindest of shades. The trees are eagerly blooming, flowers shyly opening themselves up to the sun, birds singing. It's spring, the first properly warm days of the year, and it would be a good omen if the timing hadn't been deliberately chosen for just that reason by Luo Binghe.

"Tian Yi Overlook sends their condolences," Gongyi Xiao says, "along with a thousand spirit stones."

"That," Luo Binghe says cheerfully, "will be a *great* comfort to me in this time of sorrow."

The two of them are making their pleasant, unhurried way through the winding garden paths of Huan Hua Palace, Gongyi Xiao with an armful of scrolls that he skims leisurely as they go. Luo Binghe would tell him that it can wait for later if it weren't for the fact that Gongyi Xiao seems to be enjoying it. Who doesn't like to see what sort of presents they've been given?

"Zhao Hua Temple forgot to give their condolences and just congratulate you," Gongyi Xiao continues. "But they're also sending several hundreds of bars of gold, so I think we can forgive them."

How very diplomatic of them. The Old Palace Master was brutally slaughtered several weeks ago by the newly ascended Mobei-Jun looking to make a firm and bold introduction for himself in the Demon and Human Realms. Such a tragedy that he seemed to know exactly when and where to strike, wasn't it? Luo Binghe is very solemnly pondering whether or not to pursue righteous revenge for the loss. Of *course* he wishes to avenge his dear shizun, but one must consider the potential loss of life such an endeavor would cost. Is it not his responsibility to prioritize the living and not the dead?

It has only recently become appropriate for Luo Binghe to rise from Head Disciple to Sect Leader. A brief mourning period had to first be observed, so as to not have him look *too* tastelessly overeager to replace his predecessor. But really, anyone with half a brain can guess that he's not *displeased* by current events. Who would be?

"Giving gold bars to Huan Hua? I suppose they know how to tailor their gifts to the recipient. Maybe we can use them as door stops and paperweights."

Gongyi Xiao laughs, and Luo Binghe basks in the sound of it like it's a puddle of sunshine.

“It’s far from the worst present you’ve received so far. Remember that *stuffed demon head* from Bo Shan Tower? Ah, do you think we have to put that out when they come to visit, or can we just throw it away?”

“Let’s just act like we never received it,” Luo Binghe suggests. “Demon head? What demon head? No, you didn’t give us a present at all, actually. It was very rude, but we didn’t make a big fuss about it because we’re so tactful.”

“Let’s send it back, along with a very kind note letting them know that they accidentally sent us their trash instead of the gift they surely *meant* to send us.”

It’s Luo Binghe’s turn to laugh, and Gongyi Xiao looks duly pleased with himself.

Neither of them mention Cang Qiong Mountain Sect’s ascension gift. Luo Binghe had half expected to be sent nothing, for there to be no acknowledgement from them at all. Or perhaps some cursed item, some spiteful little trap that would give him an excuse to declare war on them all. He almost wishes that’s what happened.

Instead, he had been given the carefully, painstakingly reconstructed shards of Zheng Yang. It had looked as good as new, as if it had never been shattered at all. Bright and naive as the sun, unscarred and unharmed. Perhaps it would have cut through the air just the same as before too. Luo Binghe wouldn’t know. He hadn’t touched it. There was a letter written by Yue Qingyuan, in which he had given Luo Binghe neither congratulations nor condolences. He had only apologized, and expressed happiness that Luo Binghe is still alive.

He hadn’t said what he was apologizing for, and he hadn’t mentioned what Luo Binghe had survived.

Luo Binghe almost sent it all right back out of spite. He doesn’t *need* Zheng Yang any longer; he has a new sword. He made it himself with his own two hands, after months of tutelage by Huan Hua Palace’s foremost swordsmith. No other hands have ever wielded it, there’s no bitter poison lurking within to be held at bay or stain him, and he doesn’t have to show gratitude to anyone for giving it to him. Xin Lujing is his, and only his. No one else has any claim to it at all.

But then he’d thought about Zheng Yang in Shen Qingqiu’s hands - as if he’d ever even deign to touch it - and he’d decided to keep it after all. Just to have it. Just that.

He hadn’t sent a response, at least. He had, after much soul searching, decided *not* to raze Cang Qiong Mountain to the ground and then salt the ashes. Really, they should be grateful for that highly magnanimous concession. If they’re upset about inter-sect relations growing chilly then they can very well come here and complain about it to his *face.*

“Wan Ting Wall sent us a very fine set of jewelry. I was thinking that we could perhaps give it to Fu-shimei? I mean - they can’t have meant for it to be for *you,* and it’s not like you have a wife.”

Luo Binghe had seen that jewelry, and he has never been more certain of anything in his life than that jewelry is meant as a gift for *Gongyi Xiao.* It flatters his complexion far too

perfectly to be intended for anyone but him. He makes a mental note to write some very approving correspondence to Wan Ting Wall Sect later.

“Perhaps,” he says evasively for now. He has far from given up hope to see Gongyi Xiao wearing those delicate chains of gold and black onyx stones that would complement his dark eyes so very well. Maybe wearing nothing *but* that jewelry? Much to think about. “Don’t you think she’d better like the enchanted flail from Lian He Dam?”

“Oh, she *would,”* Gongyi Xiao admits. “That’s a good point.”

“Can I trust my Head Disciple to arrange the matter for me?” Luo Binghe asks sweetly.

“Binghe,” Gongyi Xiao says. “You became Sect Leader *yesterday.* You can’t just name me Head Disciple immediately--”

“You *promised,”* Luo Binghe whines. “You promised you’d let me name you Head Disciple again once I became Sect Leader. I never would have accepted the position otherwise!”

“I know that,” Gongyi Xiao says, trying to sound reasonable but looking a little flustered. “But people are going to be expecting you to think long and hard about this choice, and choosing one *immediately* would look a little--”

“I have thought about it long and hard! I’ve been waiting to give you back your title for *years* now!”

“That’s not the argument you seem to think it is, if you never even considered anyone else,” Gongyi Xiao gently points out. “Besides, it’s traditional to name someone from a younger generation, isn’t it? We’re the same age--”

“Why would I consider anyone else when you’re the best option there is? You *promised!”*

“I know, I know!” Gongyi Xiao says. “And I’m not backing out on that! I’m just *saying* that perhaps you could wait a little first? It doesn’t have to happen *today.”*

Gongyi Xiao had firmly assured him, again and again, that he had no actual desire to become Sect Leader himself. *The Sect Leader is* too *important,* he’d confided a little sheepishly. *I wouldn’t get to do any of my favorite tasks, like teaching the new disciples how to fly for the first time. Where’s the fun in that?*

“Oh, but I had so many plans for my Head Disciple,” Luo Binghe sighs, swiftly switching to a different line of attack. “Who’s going to help me reform the Water Prison now? I know it should change, but I don’t have any ideas of my own…”

Gongyi Xiao immediately brightens with inquisitive interest, like a shark suddenly scenting blood in the water.

“Oh?” he asks cautiously. “Well, if you’re looking for *suggestions--”*

Gongyi Xiao promptly launches into what seems like a deeply and dearly rehearsed list of talking points that includes: the complete banning of all methods of torture, improved air

ventilation, guard rails (all of that acid water just lying around is *dangerous,* you know!), improved food quality, knocking down the walls between empty cells so that they can have *bigger* cells, and they should do something about the lighting down there, it's so gloomy and depressing, people really shouldn't go that long without seeing sunshine, and *oh,* what if the prisoners could have some supervised time in the gardens every day? Maybe they'd like to garden? To give them constructive activities to fill their time! They could learn some valuable skills that way, couldn't they? Oh, and they should get to interact with each other too, so they don't get lonely--

Luo Binghe listens, more than a little in awe at just how shamelessly transgressive Gongyi Xiao's views on prisoner welfare truly is. His ideal image of the Water Prison is so distant from the current reality of it that it feels hardly rooted in the real world. But, well. Why not? Luo Binghe is the Sect Leader of Huan Hua Palace, a Heavenly Demon that could bring death and destruction to all the Realms and then conquer the ashes left behind if he only pursued it in earnest. If he can do all of *that,* then he doesn't see why he can't do this. It would please Gongyi Xiao so much better than an endless campaign of domination and bloodshed, anyway.

"I know we suppress the prisoners' cultivation for security reasons," Gongyi Xiao continues. "But there's long term health drawbacks to that. If we're really careful then we could give them opportunities to meditate and circulate their meridians!"

Warden Mao Huifang will not be a fan of any of these changes. Really, she might not be the right person to be at the helm of them at all. After over four hundred years of lovingly nurturing the cruelest version of the Water Prison like it's her own child, he can't see her going quietly at all. She'll be a threat, and a not inconsiderable one.

But Luo Binghe can handle her. He's certain of it.

"Is there anything else?" he asks, his tone half teasing.

"A reading program?" Gongyi Xiao suggests eagerly, too swept up and excited to even register it. It's *too* endearing. "I think a good portion of the prisoners are illiterate, so they'll have to be taught - only if they want to be, of course--"

Gongyi Xiao thinks that he sees the best in everyone, but it isn't true. He *brings out* the best in everyone.

"Yes, Gongyi-shixiong," he says, feeling too enamored to even put into words. How can a person feel this much adoration in their heart and bear it? He feels as if he's about to burst from happiness. "Whatever you want."

"You don't have to listen to *all* of my ideas just because-- *Binghe.* You're Sect Leader now, you can't keep calling me Shixiong!"

"How about… Shiniang?" he slyly suggests.

Gongyi Xiao flushes, but his tone remains firm. "No."

“Xiao Xiao?”

“Definitely not-- Binghe!”

Luo Binghe is a kind and considerate lover, and so he makes sure to protect the back of Gongyi Xiao’s head as he pounces on him, tackling them both down onto the grassy ground in a rolling, messy heap. Scrolls go flying, tumbling away from them as they settle, Gongyi Xiao below Luo Binghe. Gongyi Xiao doesn’t even look shocked so much as he just looks indignantly flustered. From pretty much the moment Luo Binghe was granted the right to tackle Gongyi Xiao onto various surfaces, he has exploited it without shame or mercy. It’s only business as usual, really.

“Yes, Shixiong?” Luo Binghe asks innocently. He presses a quick, daring kiss to the underside of Gongyi Xiao’s jaw.

“We are out in the *open.”*

“We’re in the Goldfish Pond,” he corrects. Gongyi Xiao had been so consumed by his own excited ranting that he’d hardly noticed where Luo Binghe was leading them. He’s always had a fondness for the garden, ever since he first caught Gongyi Xiao patiently leading Xie Ruonlan through the process of casting a sword glare here. Celebratorily fucking him at this location has been a bit of a dearly prized dream for a *while* now.

“How lovely,” Gongyi Xiao says. “That’s still out in the open. Get off.”

Luo Binghe casts Gongyi Xiao his best heartfelt ‘you’d kick me out of the bed to sleep on the cold hard *floor?’* eyes, wide and innocently tragic. He doesn’t get off.

“It’s not *really* out in the open,” he wheedles. “Not right now, anyway. Didn’t you hear? The Sect Leader has requested privacy in the Goldfish Pond for the day. No one will be coming here.”

“Binghe,” Gongyi Xiao says, so scandalized that he sounds agonized with it. He’s so red, and it’s only making Luo Binghe feel even more excited. “Everyone is going to *know--”*

“Nonsense! We could be doing anything here, really.”

“And what about the grass stains? My hair?”

“We’ll say we were sparring.”

“No one is going to buy that,” Gongyi Xiao hisses, but he doesn’t attempt to dodge Luo Binghe’s next kiss, pressed into the ticklish space beneath his ear. “This is completely inappropriate - do you have any idea how much attention people are paying to you right now? You became Sect Leader *yesterday.”*

“But Gongyi-shixiong,” he says, lacing his voice with a childish whine. “You’re the only one who hasn’t given me an ascension present yet. I’ve been waiting and waiting, and you still haven’t given one to me…”

“That’s--” Gongyi Xiao falters. Luo Binghe presses his advantage mercilessly.

“It’s always been my dream to take you in this garden,” he says. “Here in the sunlight, beneath the open sky, in one of my favorite places in the whole palace… It would really help make my first proper day as Sect Leader feel *special,* really mark the occasion--”

“Fine,” Gongyi Xiao says, folding all at once, laying a hand over his eyes in a gesture of long-suffering misery. He’s bright red though, and he’s fidgeting a little in that restless, restrained way he does when he’s aroused and is too embarrassed to show it - which is almost every time he’s aroused. “Fine! But only this once, alright? We are *not* making a habit of this!”

“Yes, Shixiong!” Luo Binghe chirps obediently, and then presses an ardent, fervent kiss to Gongyi Xiao’s mouth, trying to communicate all of his gratitude and adoration through a simple connection of lips on lips. He’s not entirely sure it’s enough; he’s found that the thrusting of hips are *such* an effective way to communicate enthusiasm. “Shixiong, you’ve made this shidi so happy today, this shidi is eternally grateful…”

“Binghe. At least not while we’re--”

“But Shixiong, this shidi only wants to be *respectful--”*

“There’s nothing respectful about this! Adorable little *baby disciples* call me--”

“Shixiong, are you saying I’m *not* your most adorable shidi?”

“That’s… I didn’t say *that--”*

“Shixiong.”

“I… Oh, damn it, *Shidi--!”*

The sun shines molten gold on the palace, and every person, every bird, every flower, every gem, every last blade of grass within are all his, his, his. He won’t ever let it go, won’t let it get stolen or torn away from him. And Gongyi Xiao--

Gongyi Xiao will help make sure of it, because Luo Binghe will never have to do something alone again.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap!

I would like to thank everyone who has commented during these updates. There were in fact SO many sweet and thoughtful comments that I literally couldn't answer all the ones

I wanted to, which is incredible. Please know that I read and appreciated each and every single one of them.

Lots of people have been wondering if there will be a sequel. I'm not really planning on it, since I wanted this fic to be it's own self contained story which is satisfying in its own right. I might add some bonus oneshots in the future but they won't really be proper sequels, just gravy.

Writing and posting this fic has been a great experience, and it's fantastic that so many people came and loved it as much as I did. Thank you!

There is some more new lovely for this fic now by lady-dysnomia!

And then some even more great fanart by teknote!

More lovely fanart by lizzylavender!

And then more lovely fanart by tabbyebooks!

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by chromhoesomes

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!